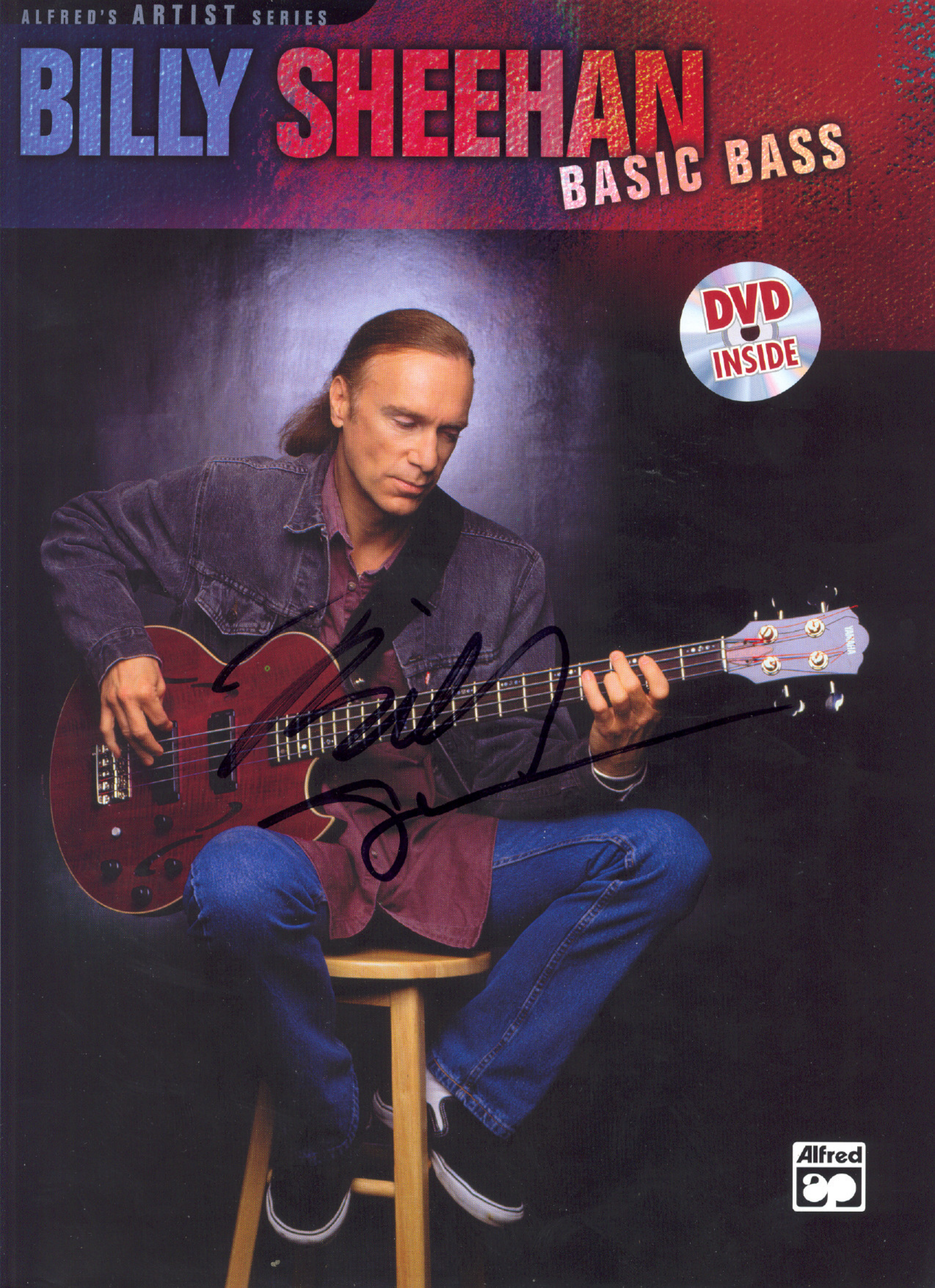
VISIT…

ALFRED'S ARTIST SERIES

BILLY SHEEHAN

BASIC BASS



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INTRODUCTION

This book is intended for a basic, absolute beginner. The reason I did this for a beginner is because a lot of you are left out—most videos, instructional books and magazines refer to people who have already been playing. So I'm going to show you some very basic things, which may seem very simple to some of you, but are the building blocks that are very important. You'll find, as the years go by, that you're glad you learned things like this now—how to pluck, how to finger with your left hand, how to hold the bass, and other fundamental essentials you'll eventually find invaluable. (Trust me.)

If you haven't already, pick up the *Billy Sheehan Basic Bass* DVD (Alfred item 21984) to watch me demonstrate everything in this book and a lot more.

Enjoy, and good luck.

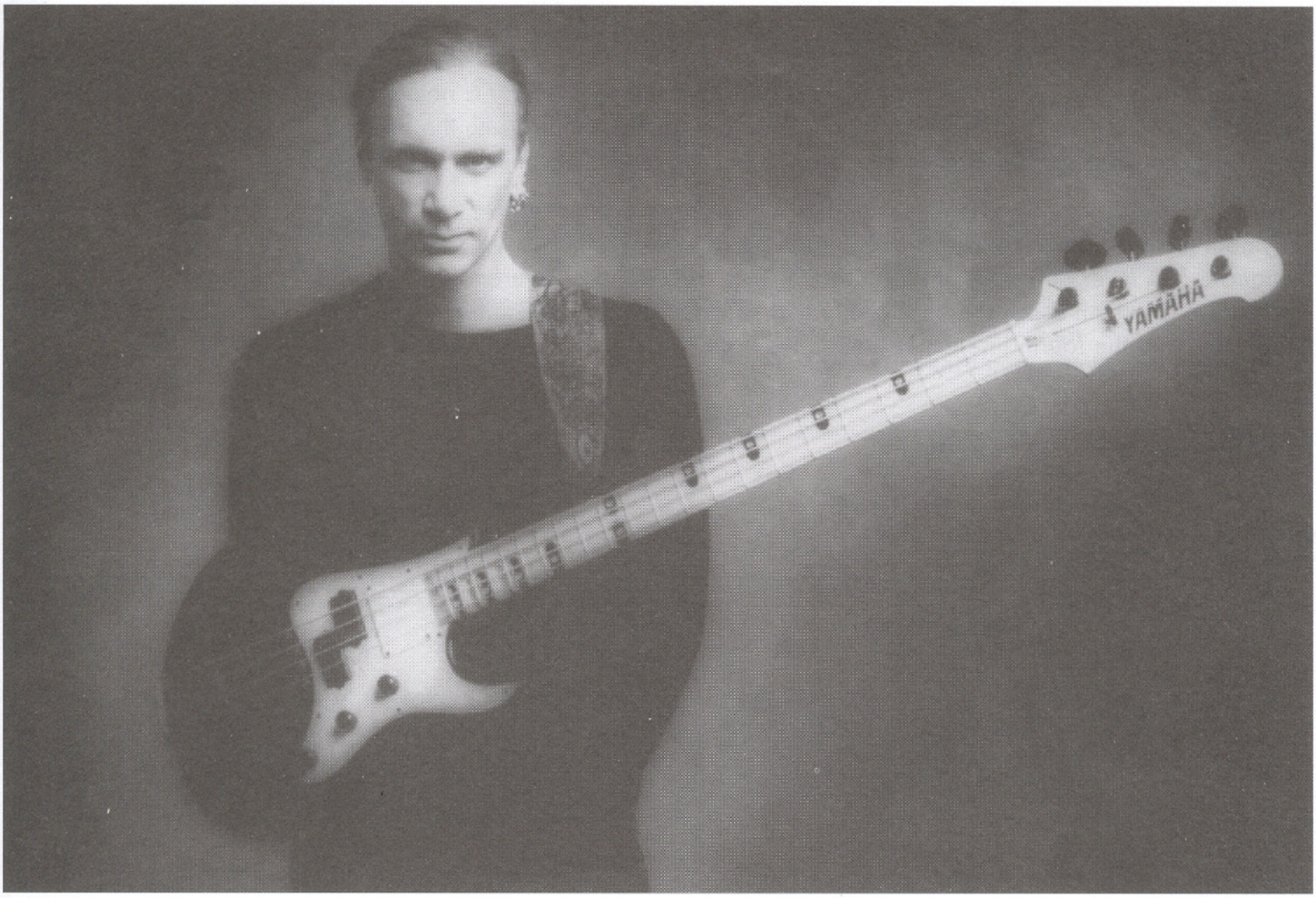
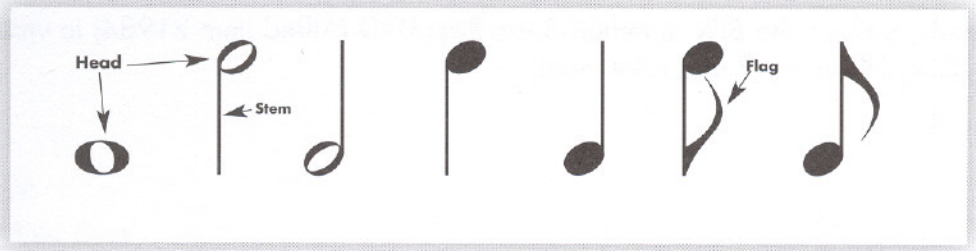


Photo: Glen LaFerman

THE BASICS OF READING MUSIC

Notes

Musical sounds are represented with symbols called *notes*.
Notes vary in appearance to indicate how long they are held and how high or low they sound.

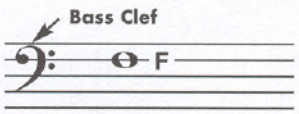


The Bass Staff

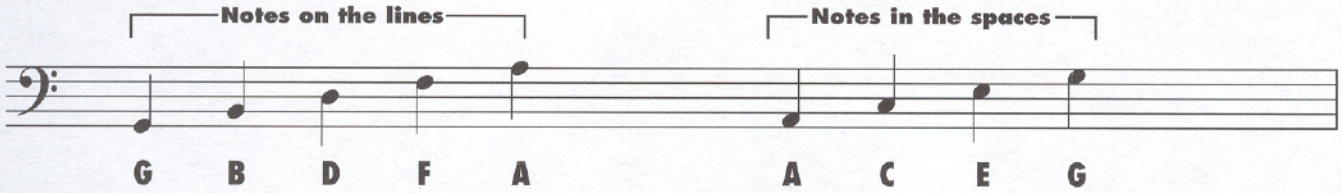
Pitch refers to the high or low quality of a sound and is determined by a note's position on a *staff* of five lines and four spaces. The lines and spaces are named sequentially with the letters A through G, and a note is placed on a specific line or space to indicate its name and pitch.

A symbol called a *clef* is shown at the beginning of every staff and designates the letter name for one of the staff lines as a point of reference. Bass music is written using the *bass clef*, which is also called the *F clef*. It indicates that the fourth line of the staff is the note F.

The Staff



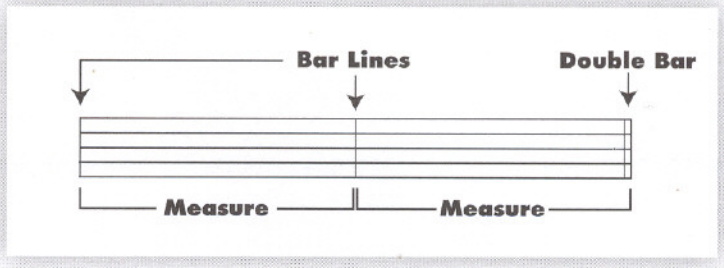
NOTES ON THE BASS STAFF



You may want to use this simple trick to remember the notes.
On the lines: Great Big Dogs Fight Animals. On the spaces: All Cows Eat Grass.

Measures (Bars)

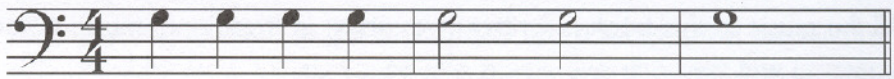
Music is divided into equal parts called *measures* or *bars*. One measure is divided from another by a *bar line*. You will see a *double bar* at the end of the examples in this book.



Time Signatures & Counting Time

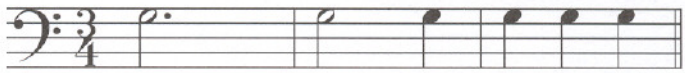
Each piece of music has numbers at the beginning called a *time signature*. These numbers tell us how to count time by specifying how many beats are in every measure and the kind of note that gets one beat. Most common time signatures have a 4 as the bottom number, and the most common time signature is $\frac{4}{4}$.

The top number is 4, which means there are four beats in each measure.



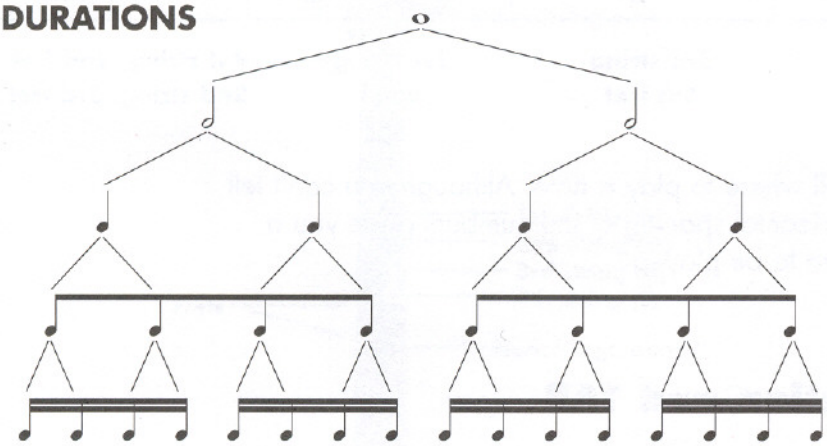
The bottom number is 4, which means a quarter note ♩ counts for one beat.

The top number is 3, which means there are three beats in each measure.



The bottom number is 4, which means a quarter note ♩ counts for one beat.

NOTE & REST DURATIONS



Whole Note = 4 beats

Half Note = 2 beats

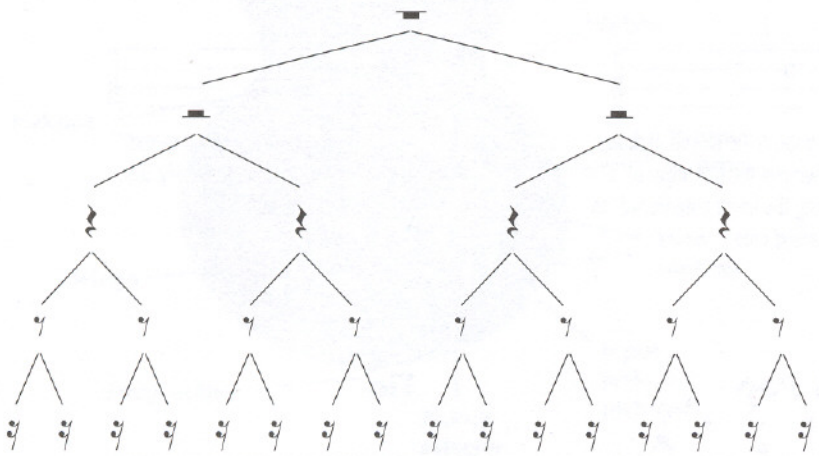
Quarter Note = 1 beat

Eighth Note = ½ beat
Single eighth notes appear with a flag: ♪

Sixteenth Notes = ¼ beat
Single sixteenth notes have two flags: 𝅘𝅥𝅯

♩. **Dotted Quarter Note = 1 ½ beats**

Rests are used to indicate specific durations of silence, just as notes indicate specific durations of sound.



Whole Rest = 4 beats, or any whole measure

Half Rest = 2 beats

Quarter Rest = 1 beat

Eighth Rest = ½ beat

Sixteenth Rest = ¼ beat

Sharps, Flats, and Naturals

♯ **A *sharp* means to play a note one fret higher.**

♭ **A *flat* means to play a note one fret lower.**

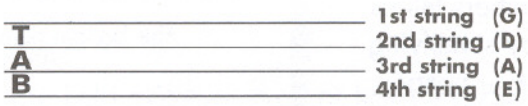
♮ **A *natural* returns a sharp or flat note to its usual position.**

When sharps, flats and naturals appear next to notes they are called *accidentals*. An accidental applies to a note until the end of a measure.

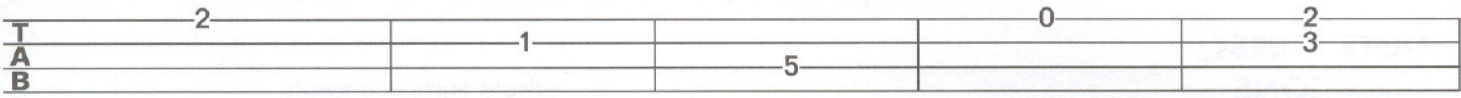
READING TAB

All the music in this book is written two ways: in traditional music notation and in TAB.

Below each traditional music staff you'll find a four-line TAB staff. Each line represents a string of the bass, with the highest, thinnest string at the top and the lowest, thickest string at the bottom.



Numbers placed on the TAB lines tell you which fret to play.
A zero means to play the string open (not fingered).

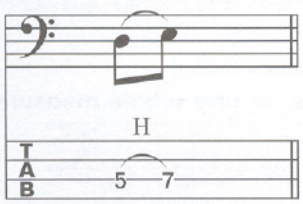


1st string 2nd fret	2nd string 1st fret	3rd string 5th fret	1st string open	1st string, 2nd fret 2nd string, 3rd fret

By glancing at the TAB, you can immediately tell where to play a note. Although you can't tell exactly what the rhythm is from the TAB, the horizontal spacing of the numbers gives you a strong hint about how long or short the notes are to be played.

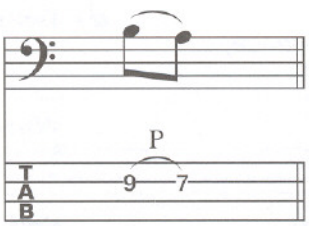
Techniques in Standard Notation and TAB

Hammer-on



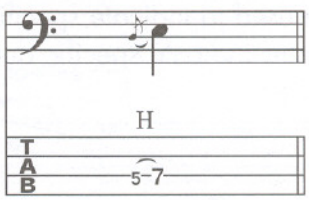
Pick the first note, then sound the second note by tapping down on the string with another left-hand finger. These notes are usually played on the same string.

Pull-off



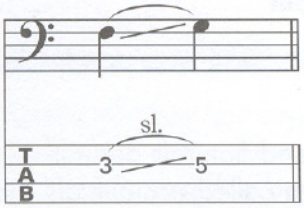
Finger both notes to be played. Pick the first note, then pull the fret finger off the string, keeping the lower note fretted, to sound the second note.

Grace Note



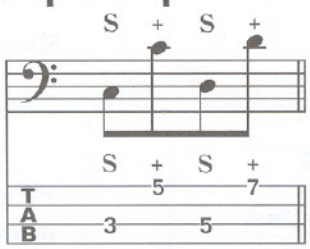
Grace notes are smaller than normal notes. Play a grace note quickly, just before the main note.

Slide



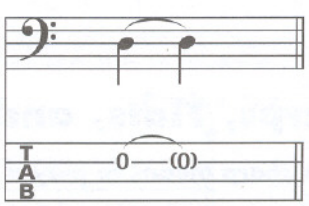
Pick the first note, then slide the fret finger to the correct fret to sound the second note. The second note is not picked.

Slap & Pop



Hit the string with a loose thumb to slap, then use a finger to pluck back up for the pop.

Tie

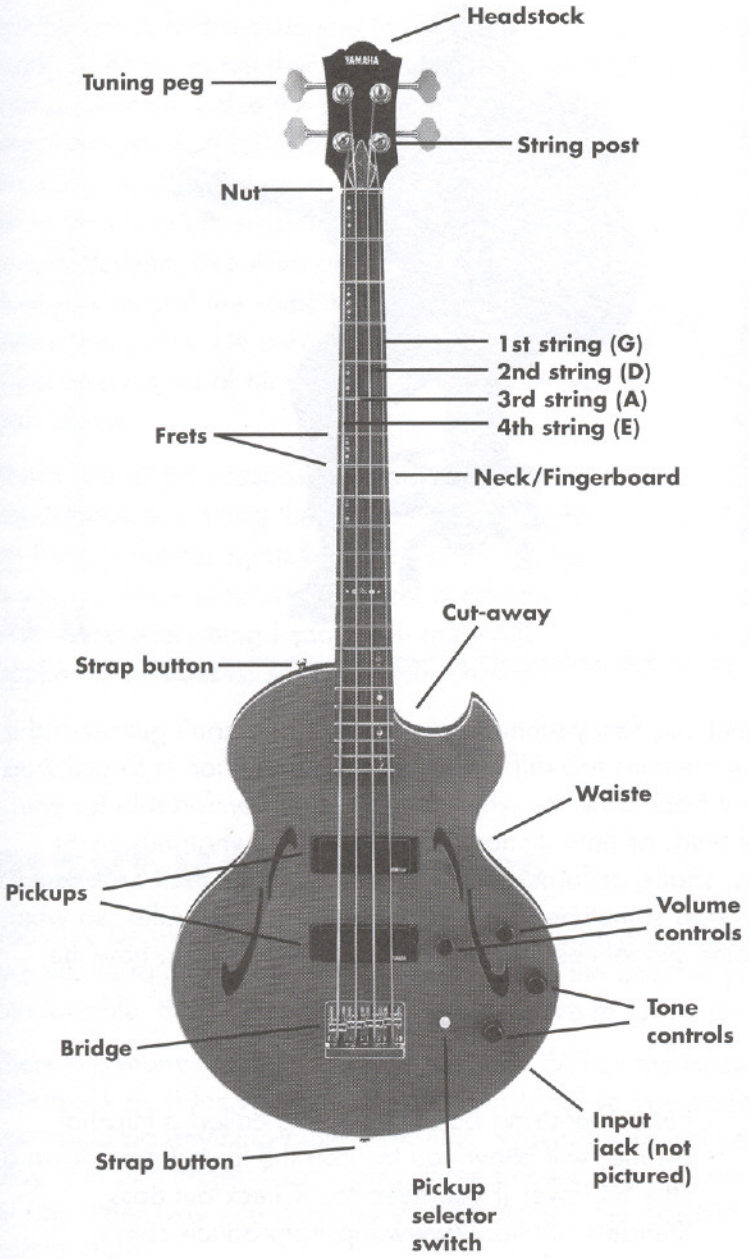


A tie is used to extend the length of a note. Play the first note, then continue to hold it for the value of the second note. Do not pick the second note.

CHOOSING A BASS

If you've decided to play bass, you're probably going to need to get one. There are a lot of great basses on the market, and you should go for what feels good for you. I'll give a couple points over the next few pages about what you might want to look for in a bass.

There are fundamental components of every bass, and they are labeled in the picture below. This bass is a semi-hollow body acoustic/electric model I designed in collaboration with Yamaha. I play this same bass on the DVD.



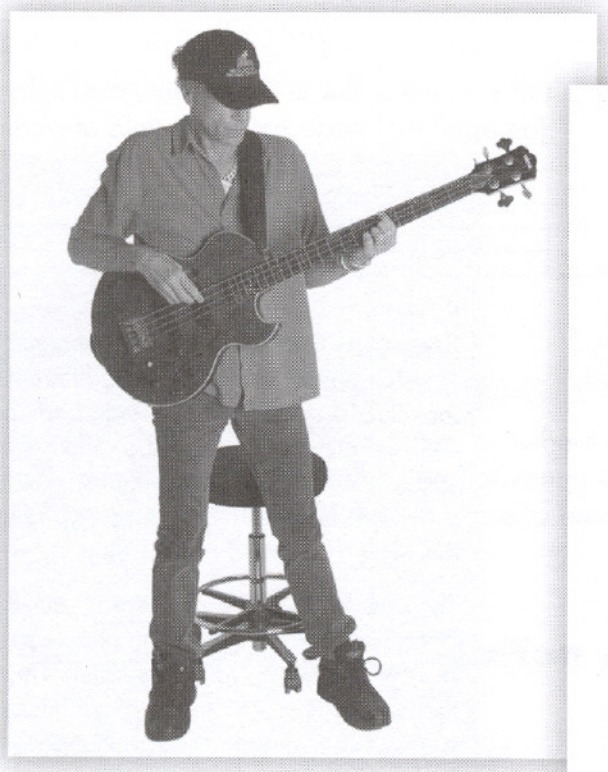
Every bass is made of a different piece of wood, so each one is going to sound different. Some may sound similar, like a maple body and an ash body. The sound may be different according to the wood, according to the shape, according to what's done with it, also according to how the neck is attached to the body.

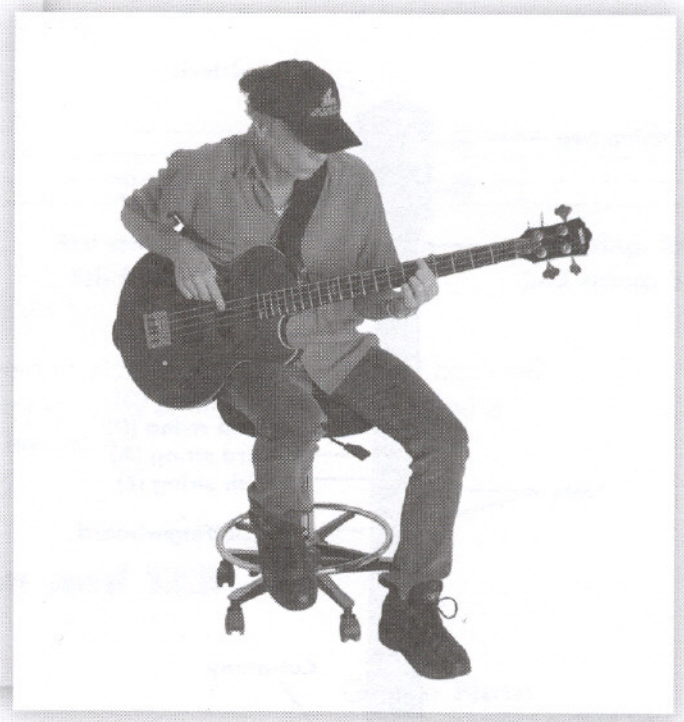
The bass I play in the DVD has a neck that is bolted on from behind. Some people say that a bass with a bolt-on neck has a different sound than one with a neck that is glued on, or one with a neck that is one giant piece that goes the entire length of the body (the body is in two pieces that attach to it later). This is all covered in books and information about how basses are made.

You can go on the Internet and find a lot of different great bass companies. Just go to the websites of manufacturers like Fender, Gibson, Yamaha, or Warwick and find out what their basses are made of and how they're built, and that will help you determine what appeals to you.

Holding the Bass

When choosing a bass, how it sits on you and how it feels are very important because you're going to spend a lot of time with this thing sitting on your lap. It should feel relatively comfortable. The length of your strap is very important because sometimes it will determine where the bass sits on your body when you stand up. If it's too low, it looks better but it's going to change all the angles of your hand for how you play. Be prepared to know that the position of the bass on your body (whether you're sitting or standing) has everything to do with how your arms go around it and how your hands hold it.





Later on, you'll find out that when you want to do something fancy-schmancy, your left hand can't get around if the bass is too low. It looks cool like that, but it's just sometimes too difficult to play. One solution is to pull it up for the time being to do that fancy lick and then drop it back down to where it feels more comfortable for you. But there are no rules as far as how a bass should be held, or how it should be played, or what music you should do, or what scales you should play in any way, shape or form. That's good in that you're not restricted and can play anything your little heart desires; but it's bad sometimes because there are no real rules, so what are the guidelines? My approach is to try and give some guidelines without enforcing any rules on how the bass is played or how it's approached.

How Many Strings

Another issue you should decide up front when choosing a bass is how many strings it should have. Five- and six-string basses are very popular now. Generally, a five-string bass adds a lower string so you can get lower notes. A six-string bass adds a lower note as well as a higher one. There's kind of a myth that a five- or six-string bass is more difficult to play, or that you're a better player if you play a five- or six-string bass. I don't necessarily think that's true—I happen to be a creature of habit, so I've played a four-string my whole life. I have a six-string—I've used it on a bunch of records, and it's not that much more difficult once you get used to it.

For a four-string bass, something called a Hipshot D-Tuner will allow you to drop the lowest note down a little bit lower if you need to. Check out Bass Xtenders at http://www.hipshotproducts.com for more information.

There are a lot of things to know about your bass. Check out a great reference book such as *Guitar Shop Setup and Maintenance* from Alfred (item 18479) for more information.

Stick With One Main Bass

One of the reasons choosing the right bass should be important to you is that you're going to be sitting with it on you for a long time. It's going to be a part of you, so you want it to be comfortable.

I suggest that you try to stick with the same instrument for a long time. Maybe in the beginning you will change around a lot with a few instruments until you find something comfortable; but once you find a bass you think is going to work, don't go to another bass as soon as you run into a problem. Solve the problem. That's a very important point. A lot of times people give up on a bass too quickly and go to something else, losing a lot of time and experience that they could have on one instrument. Like most old-school players, Jaco Pastorius played the same beat-up old bass for years and years. He carried it around with him and it became a part of him. My original P Bass was a part of me.

That's one of the reasons I'm emphasizing the importance of picking the right instrument right up front. Whether it has four, five or six strings is your choice—whatever you feel comfortable with. Most everything I show you musically applies to all basses, so make your choice.

Passive or Active

Electronics are another important aspect. There are two types: passive and active. Passive means there's no battery—you just plug in and it's ready to go. Active means there's a battery. I usually don't use active instruments at all. From my point of view, an active bass adds another variable when you're onstage. While you're playing, you might feel uncertain about things like, "Did I lock my keys in the dressing room?" or "Are the monitors feeding back?" But somewhere in the back of your mind, you're going to get this thought: "Is the battery OK?" The fewer variables you have, the more likely you are to stay on an even keel as you gradually work up to higher levels of playing. The more things change around you, the more you're uncertain of what it is you need to troubleshoot. So the battery issue is my determining factor for whether a bass should be active or passive, but it's your choice.

There are a lot of advantages to an active bass such as having more electronic variables, better tone controls, and being louder. A passive bass generally sounds warm, though that can be very subjective. So try an active bass, try a passive bass, fool around with them and see which one is best for you. I really want to emphasize that you need to make a lot of these things your choice. I've explained the choices so you can decide what is best for you.

RIGHT-HAND BASICS

You may be wondering why I keep mentioning the importance of the bass's position as it sits on you. It has everything to do with how your hands get to the bass so you can actually play the notes. If the bass feels comfortable, then we're at the point where we're ready to play a note.

There are many ways of plucking the bass. When the bass first appeared years and years ago, there was a little block on it for you to hold with your hand so you could play with your thumb. Those guys didn't know you could do anything other than that. Playing with just your thumb is a valid way to play, but you can also play with one finger, two fingers, three fingers, four fingers, all five if you want, thumb-slapping, with a pick, or any other way you can conceive of. Again, the position of the bass on your body will help your hand feel comfortable.

One very, very important point about finger playing is to be sure there is always a spot where you can solidly anchor your thumb. The opposable thumb is what the hand has to push against, and that gives your fingers the strength to pull hard. If your thumb isn't anchored, you can't pull as hard, so this is a very important point to remember.

Plucking with One Finger

Let's take some of the things we've already talked about and apply them to actually playing a note. You've got the bass—it's comfortable, it's in your lap, your arm is in position. Anchor your thumb, take one finger and play.

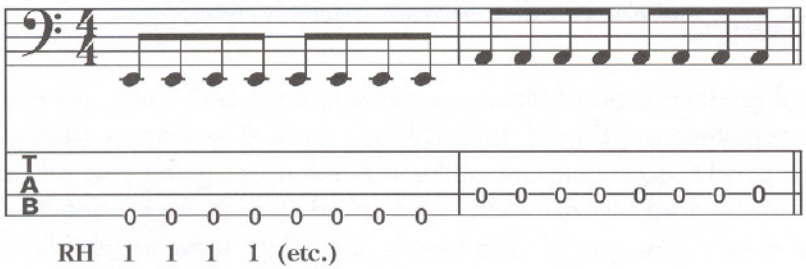
It's as simple as that. The beginning of the whole adventure is that first note. A musical career starts with one note, like a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step—there's your first step. Now, what you want to be able to do is consistently play notes in sequence. Because most music is rhythmic, you need to stay in time—you might want to get a metronome or play with a drum machine. I also encourage you to play along with recordings—I did it a lot, and still do. Just play in time; it's as simple as that.

1. First finger in position.

2. First finger after striking the 1st string.

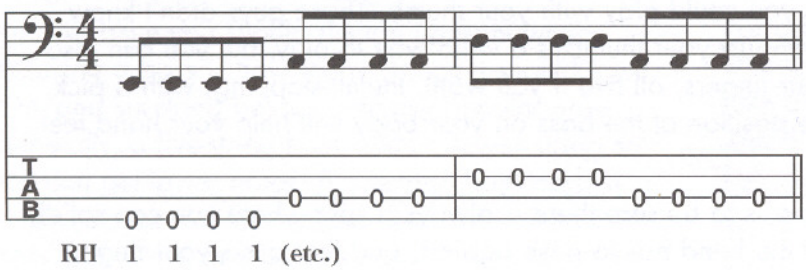
Focus on just the right hand to begin with. Rather than dealing with what notes you're playing, or with scales, chords and music theory, start with the mechanics of being able to just pluck a note. Get in a comfortable spot and play the following examples slowly and evenly. These exercises aren't music—they're just to get the mechanics of your fingers working.

Exercise 1



Exercise 2

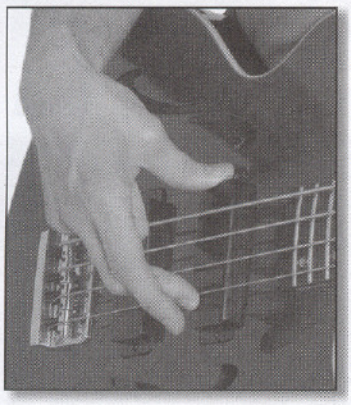
Now, let's try going across a few strings.



It's all just about being able to pluck the notes, make them sound consistent, and keep them in time (with a metronome in your head). The basic concept: the thumb is locked, the finger pulls.

Plucking with Two Fingers

When you go to two fingers, the same principle applies, but it's a little more complicated now that we're sharing the rhythmic work between two fingers.



1. Second finger in position.

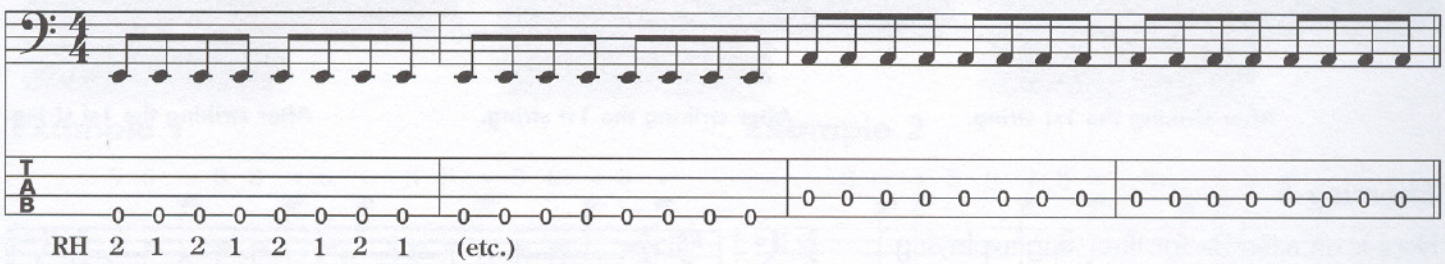
2. Second finger after striking the 1st string.

3. First finger in position.

4. First finger after striking the 1st string.

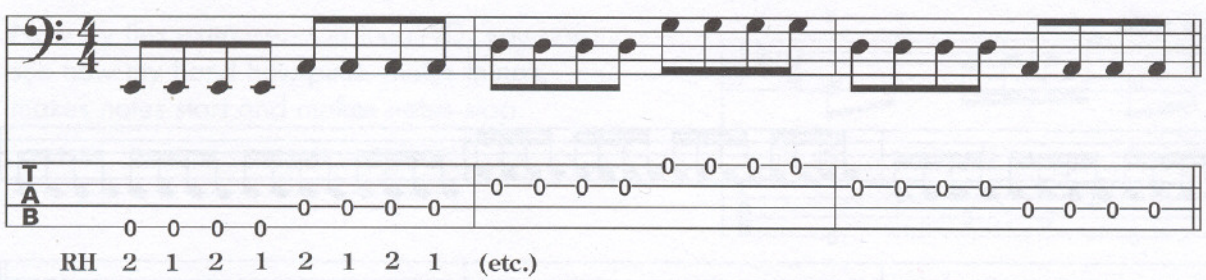
Your goal with this next exercise is to get your two fingers even, so it's not going "**One** two **Three** four **Five** six **Seven** eight" or "one **Two** three **Four** five **Six** seven **Eight**"—you know, accenting the wrong note. Basically, you just want to be able to play both fingers at the same volume, using the same attack, so they sound like the same finger playing.

Exercise 3



Play the next exercise back and forth, back and forth. Even though I've played for more than 35 years, I still sit down and practice this pattern with a metronome to warm up for a show or before I start a recording project, playing with one finger, two fingers, then with three, then four. I'll do every combination and warm up my fingers slowly and easily with just this exercise.

Exercise 4



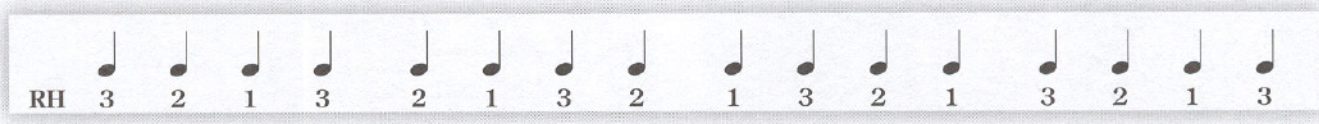
Using a Metronome

It is very important to play simple exercises like these with a metronome. To this day, I do so for hours. If you have trouble with any one thing, stop and go back to the point before you were having trouble. For example, if using two fingers isn't working for you, go back to using one.

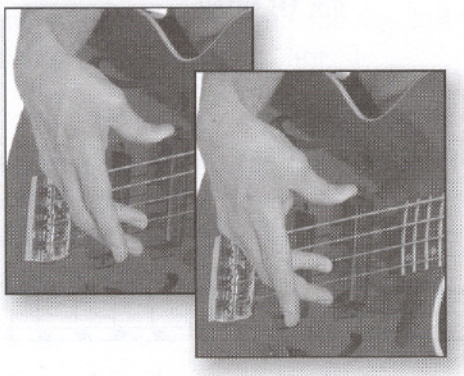
Plucking with Three Fingers

Most questions I get about my playing have to do with three-finger technique. First, there's the question of which finger to start with and what direction to go in. I always start with the third finger (ring finger) and go in the order 3 (ring), 2 (middle), 1 (index). The second thing has to do with how most of the music we play is divided into groups of either two or four. In four, you can count like this:

When you use three fingers, you're playing an odd number into an even number, which leaves one note hanging each time that "jumps" over to the next finger in order. When I play groups of four notes, I'll start over again with finger 3. Each group of four notes starts with a different finger:

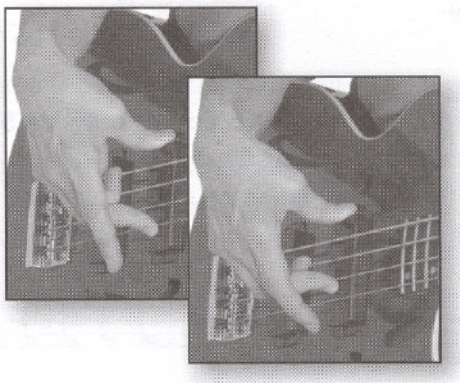


Third finger in position.



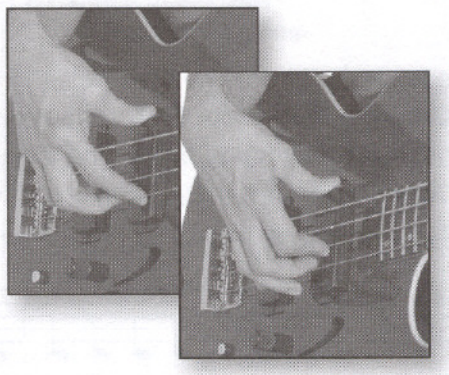
After striking the 1st string.

Second finger in position.



After striking the 1st string.

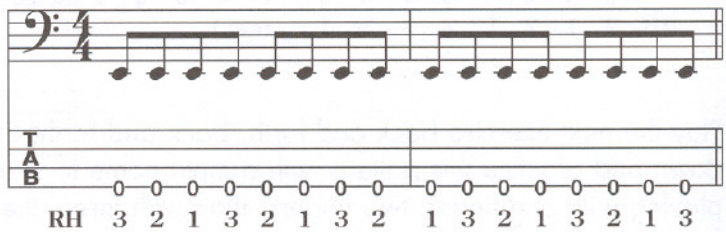
First finger in position.



After striking the 1st string.

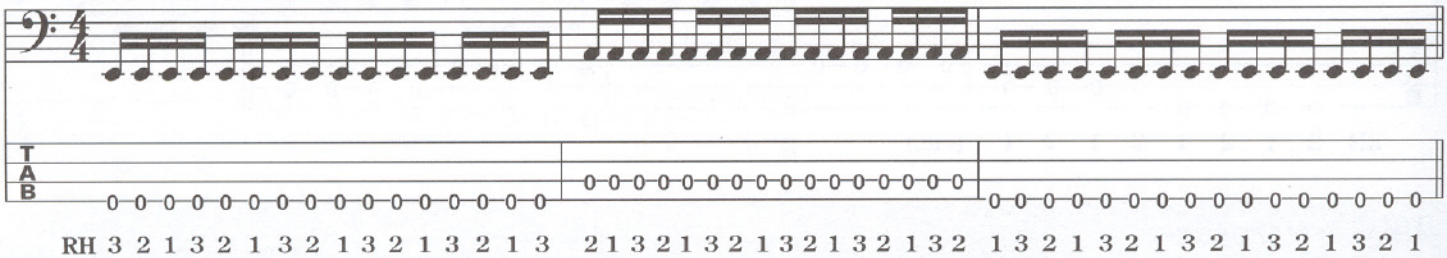
Exercise 5

Here is an exercise for three-finger playing. Notice the three-finger pattern is ring (3), middle (2), index (1). Take it **way** slow. If it's not making sense to you or becomes difficult, don't be afraid to take it as slow as possible.



Exercise 6 is faster. Remember to practice slowly, and don't be afraid to do it super ultra slow until you get it. Also, make sure your thumb is solidly locked in one spot so your hand is not flying all over the place—it's easier to stay in one spot.

Exercise 6

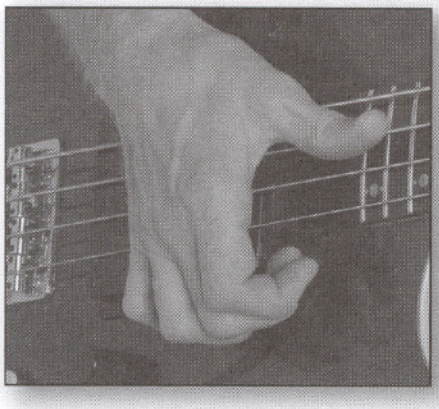


This is all simple and basic. When you see me or anyone else play a whole bunch of licks, it's all based on these fundamentals. If you really get them solidly in, it will be much easier later on when you want to play some fancy licks (or whatever it is you want to do, whatever your goal is as a player) because you've laid a good, solid foundation.

SLAP AND POP

The right-hand technique you'll need for slapping and popping is quite a bit different than what you just learned about locking your thumb and plucking. Slapping and popping originated with Larry Graham, a famous bass player. He didn't have a drummer, so he mimicked what the drums do on the bass and snare—the slap is the sound of hitting a bass drum, and the pop is the sound of the snare.

Slap (S)



For a slap, hit down with a loose thumb.

Mute

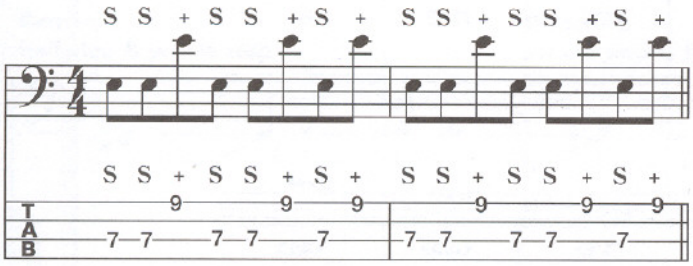
Mute the string by grabbing it with your left hand.

Pop (+)

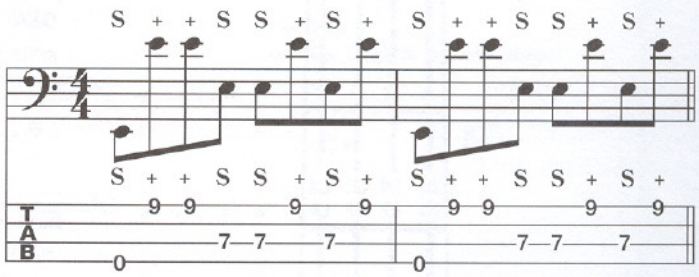
Use your third finger (or whichever is most comfortable) to pluck back up.

Your right hand is just going to move **down-up, down-up, down-up**. You can hit different strings—just hold an octave. The sound is similar to the patterns a drummer would play on the bass drum and snare.

Example 1

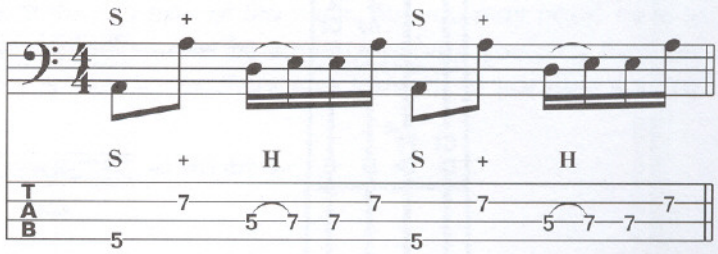


Example 2



Now try this exercise. On the DVD, you can see how my hand hits, pulls, mutes things, makes notes start and makes notes stop.

Example 3



Watch your drummer, and lock into him. Get a song or a piece of music by a slap player that you love and listen to how he plays. The basic technique is hitting down with the thumb and plucking up again with the finger.

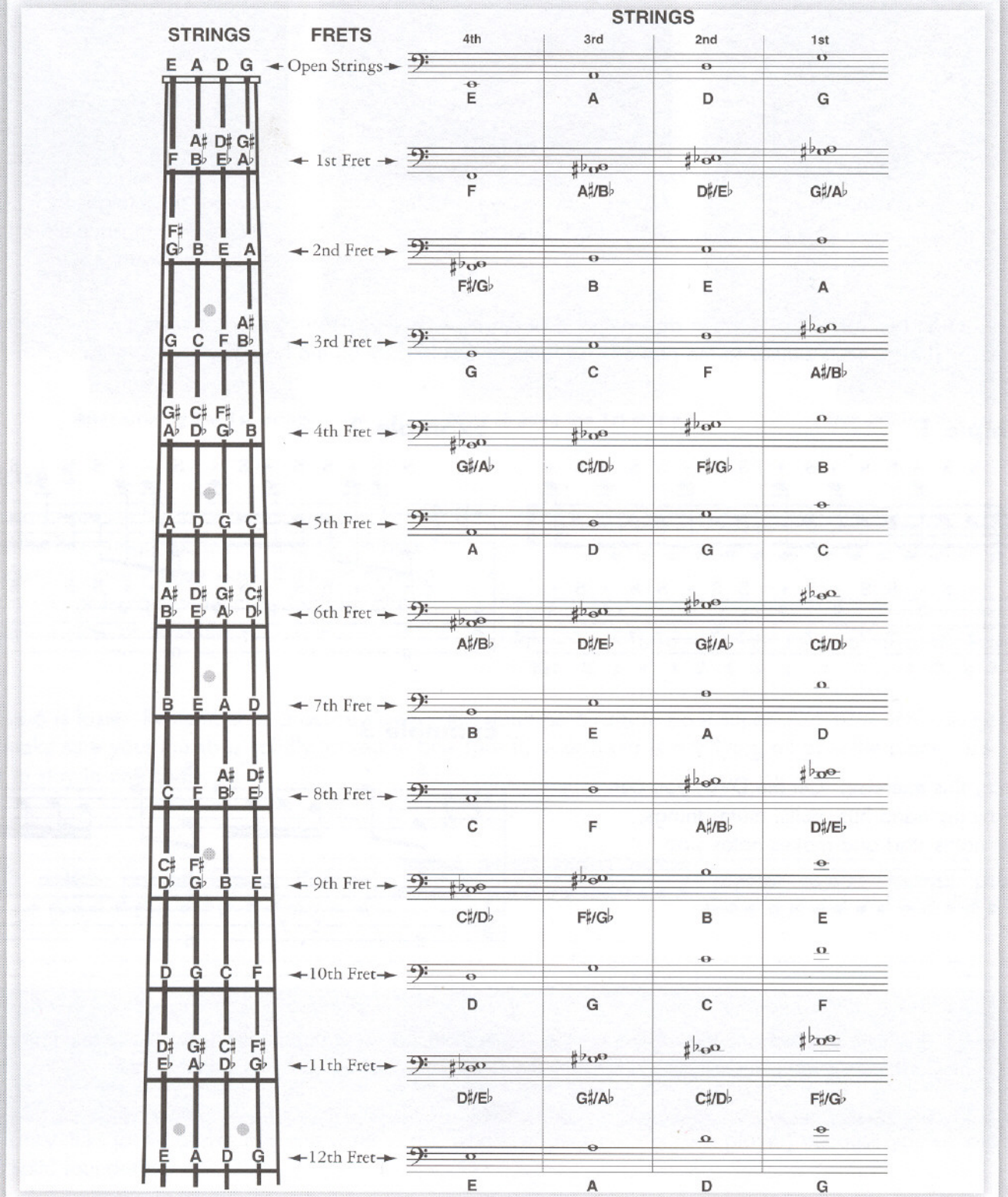
LEFT-HAND BASICS

Proper shape of the left hand and fingers.

Now that we've covered how to pluck a note, you have to know what note to pluck. I'm not going to get into a lot of theory here. I'll give you the very basics and you can take it from there.

If you don't already know the notes on the bass, take some time and learn them. A great way to learn is with a solid bass method like *Alfred's MAX Bass* (item 22653), or *Alfred's Teach Yourself to Play Bass* (item 14876). Here is a diagram of the bass fingerboard to get you started.

Notes on the Fingerboard



THE MAJOR SCALE

Basically, I play one scale, the major scale: **do re mi fa sol la ti do**. I'll be demonstrating here in the key of G because it's very easy to move around on the neck playing the G scale.

Almost everything I play up and down the neck is made from the components of the major scale. Once you know this scale, it's going to be really simple for you to pull apart any lick or music you hear and figure out what it is and how to play it. Having your ears developed to that level is great because it speeds up your time in the recording studio and the time it takes to learn new songs, and it gives you the ability to jam with other musicians because you can hear what they're doing. It's a very important thing to learn.

Some people worry that the neck might be too big or too wide and that they need to do a large stretch in order to be accepted as a bass player. You'll almost never have to use huge stretches or bridge across many strings at the same time, so don't worry how big or small the neck is. I prefer a larger neck only because it has more wood on it, gets more sustain out of the bass, and is just a more stable, big chunk of mass to hold the strings where they should be.

Three Patterns of a Scale

I play all the major scales using three basic patterns:

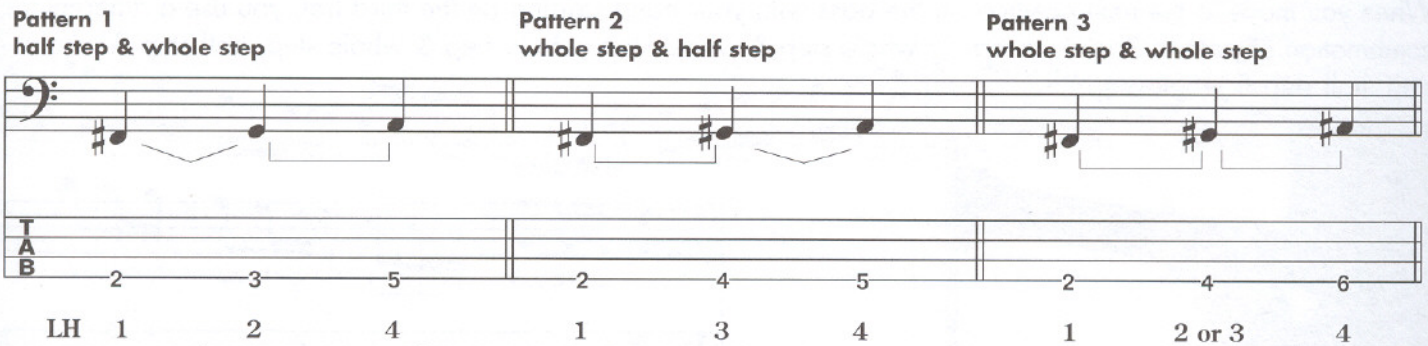
Pattern 1 = half step & whole step

Pattern 2 = whole step & half step

Pattern 3 = whole step & whole step

Half step = 1 fret

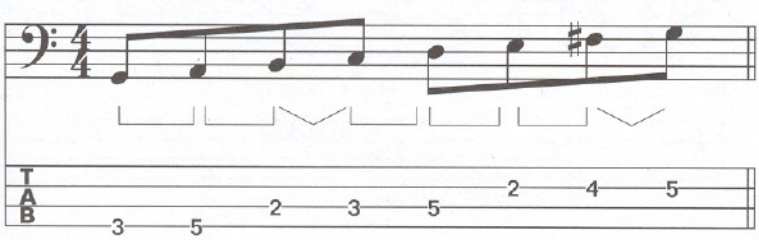
Whole step = 2 frets



You can use either your second finger or your third finger to play the middle note in pattern 3. If this is too much of a stretch for you, it's because you are playing at the top part of the neck. But you may never have to make that kind of a stretch, so don't worry about it. These patterns are the same anywhere you play them on the neck, so if your hand is very small, you can play the pattern somewhere else instead, or just play the first note and move your hand up to play the others.

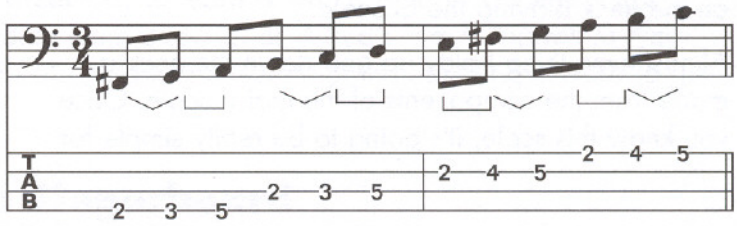
Here is the eight-note G major scale:

G Major Scale



G MAJOR SCALE STARTING ON THE 2ND FRET

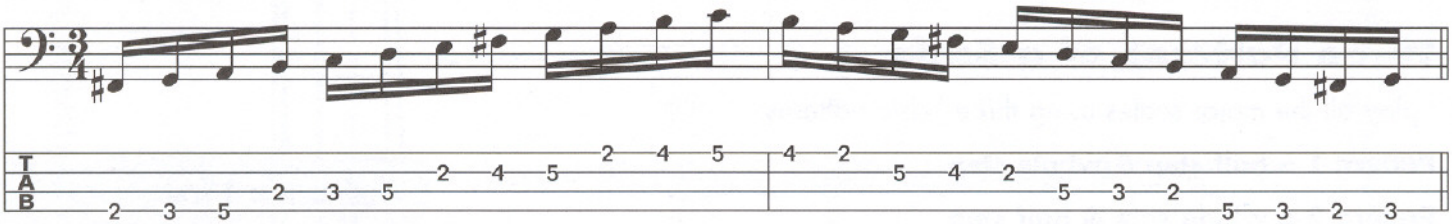
The first example is basically the G major scale with notes added to it so there are three notes per string. I put in an octave below the F-sharp, and also added notes on the 1st string, and all these notes belong to the G major scale. The sequence uses patterns 1 and 2: half step & whole step (4th string), half step & whole step (3rd string), whole step & half step (2nd string), whole step & half step (1st string).



Pattern 1: half step & whole step

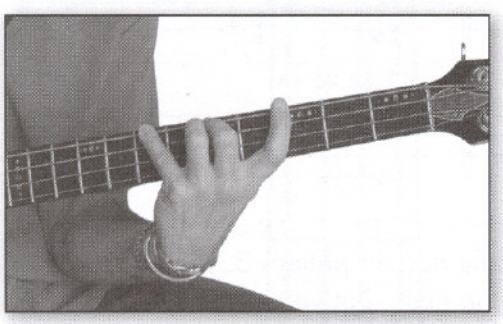
The next example shows all the notes of a G major scale that exist in this position on the bass (with your hand starting on the 2nd fret). If you're going to play in the key of G major, all these notes are legal. You could also throw in an extra low E—that's legal too.

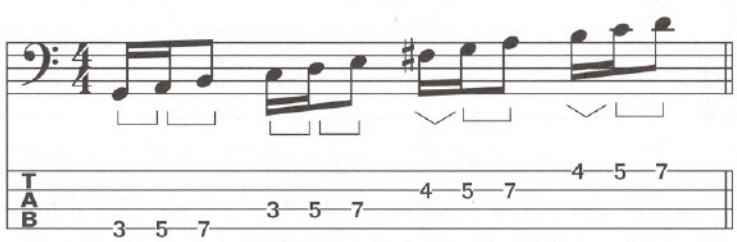
Don't worry so much about your right hand now. You can pluck the notes with one or two fingers or use a pick, or you can just finger the notes with your left hand.



G MAJOR SCALE STARTING ON THE 3RD FRET

When you move to the next position on the bass with your hand starting on the third fret, you use a different combination of pattern 3 and pattern 1: whole step & whole step, whole step & whole step, half step & whole step, half step & whole step.

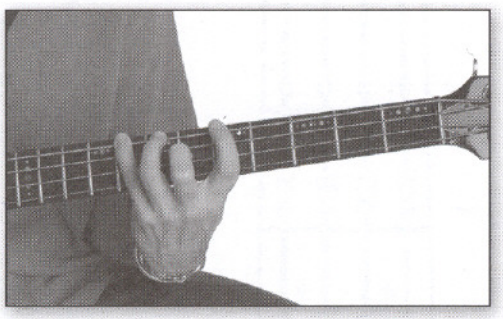


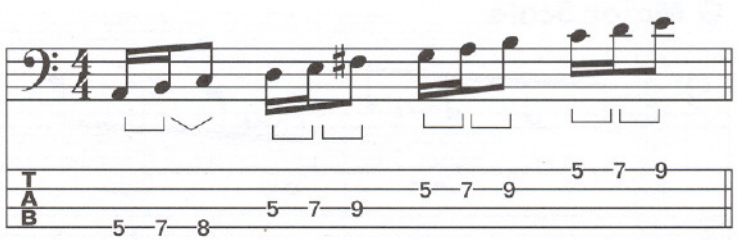


Pattern 3: whole step & whole step

G MAJOR SCALE STARTING ON THE 5TH FRET

The next position is whole step & half step, then three of the whole step & whole step pattern.

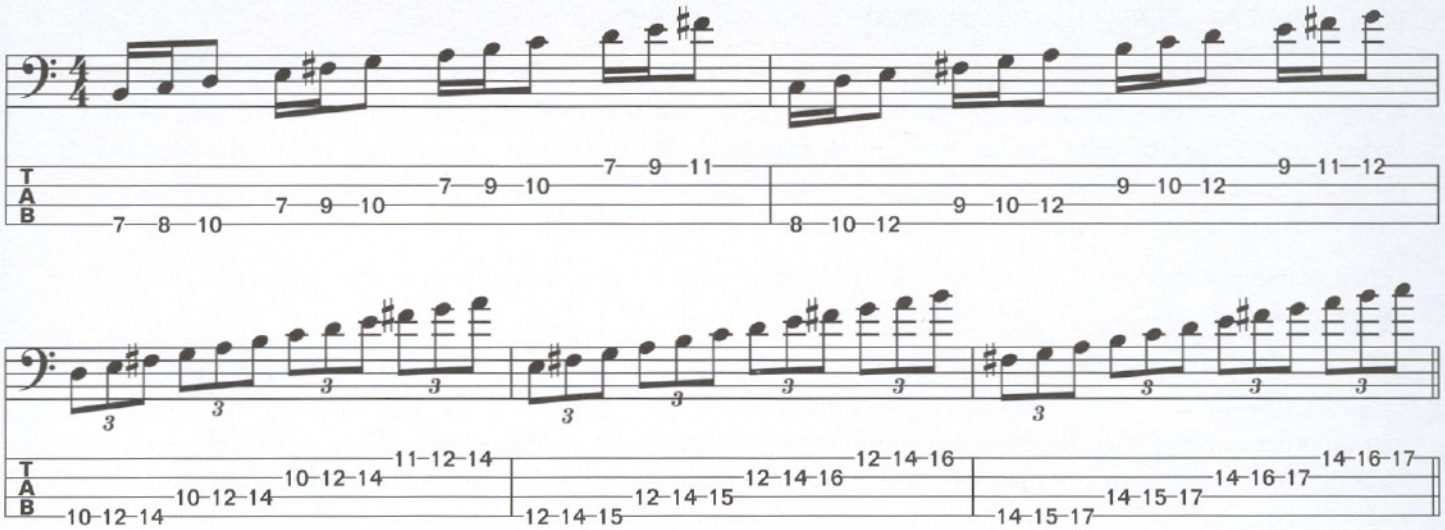




Pattern 2: whole step & half step

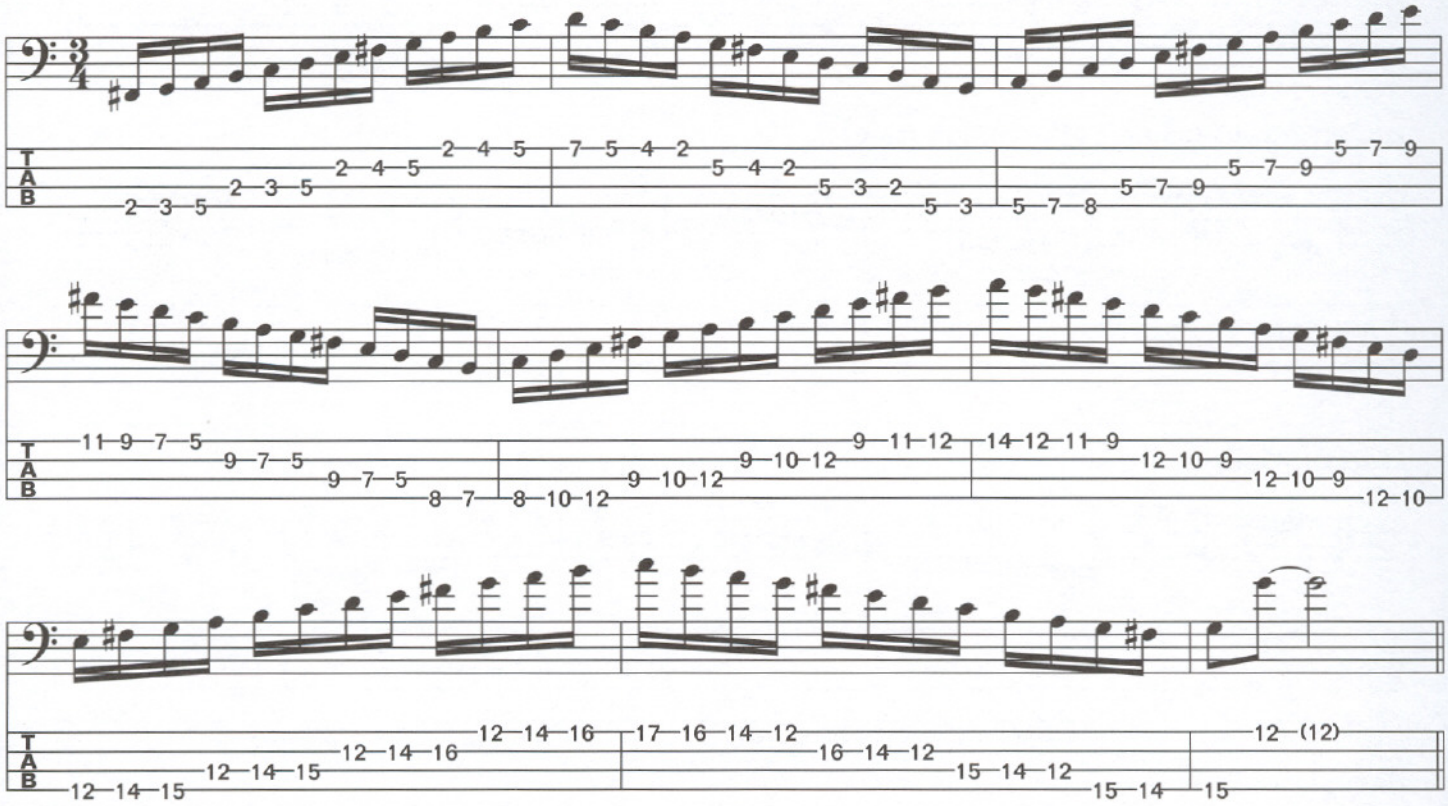
G MAJOR SCALE: UPPER POSITIONS

This example continues higher up the neck.



The Notes in the Key of G Major

When you're in the key of G major, all you need to know how to do is play those three patterns, repeated up and down the neck on the notes of the G major scale. This exercises shows all the notes in G major on the bass.



The mechanics of your left hand have a lot to do with where your arm is located. If you hold your arm out, your fingers won't spread apart; but if you pull your elbow in a little, your hand changes so you can stretch out more. To extend the number of notes you can play on one string with one hand, what you want to do is try to pull your elbow in a little bit.

Again, we're back to how important it is to get the bass in a position where it feels good on your body.

Elbow out.

Elbow in.

MODES

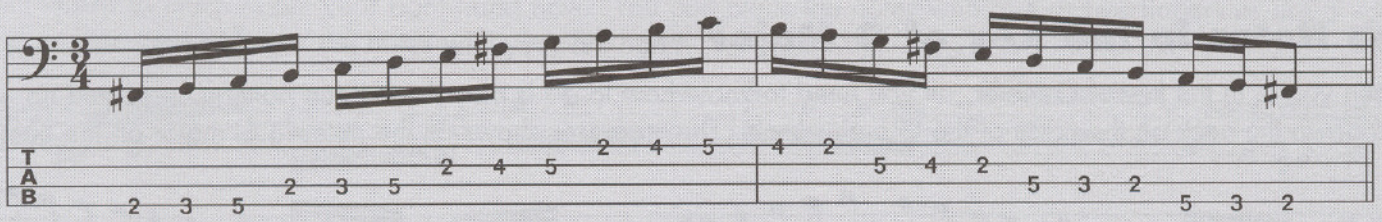
Now to elaborate a little bit more on those patterns you played with the left hand.

In every key, you have seven modes. The major scale is called the Ionian mode. When you play the same notes starting on the second note of the scale, you get the Dorian mode. Starting on the third note of the scale gives you the Phrygian mode. You get the Lydian mode if you start on the fourth note; the Mixolydian mode if you start on the fifth note; the Aeolian mode, which is the natural minor scale, if you start on the sixth note; and when you start on the seventh note, you have the Locrian mode.

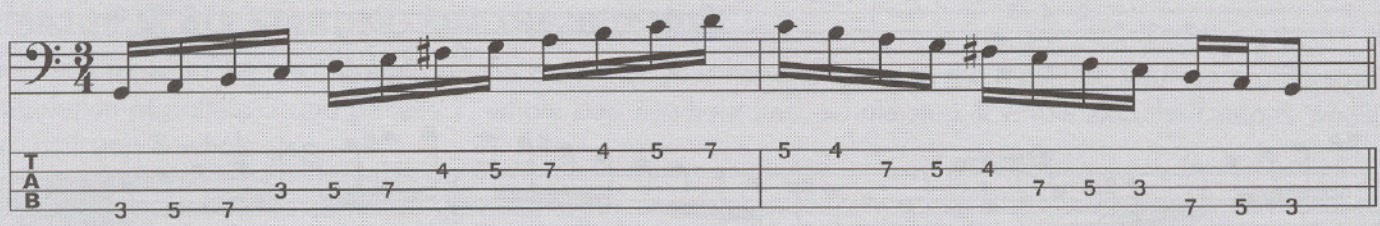
When playing in the key of G, the modes are as follows. Make sure to memorize how the patterns look on the fretboard.

The names of the modes (Locrian, Ionian, etc.) sound very complicated. I personally don't know them. I play by ear so I know little, if any, actual theory. The modes are noted here for reference, but don't get stuck thinking you can't get out and start playing until you know a lot of theory. I encourage you to learn as much as you can or as much as you need to, but remember that the whole point is to get out and start playing and performing.

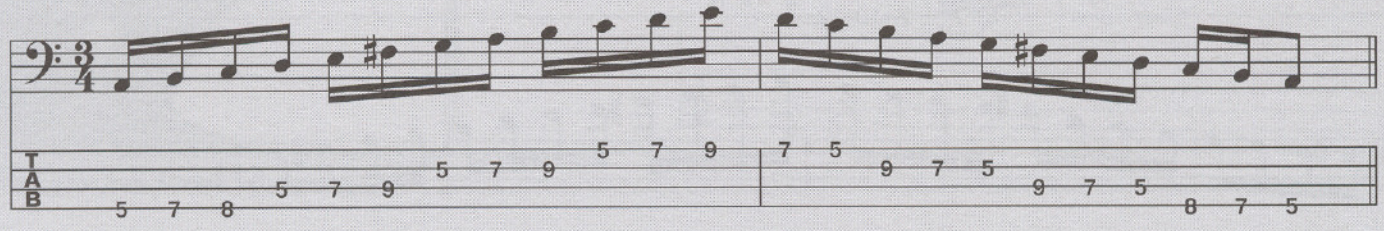
Locrian Mode



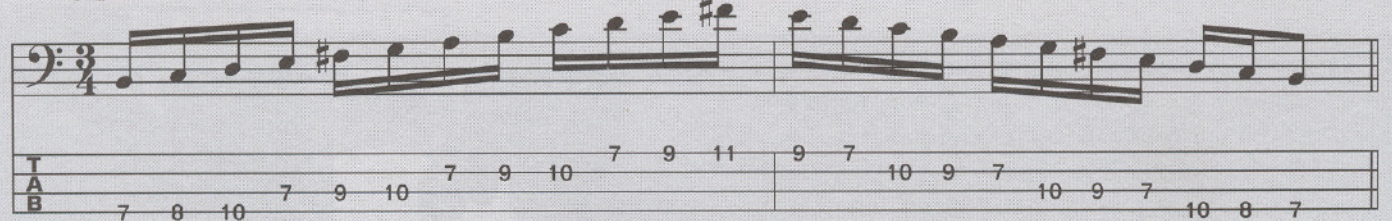
Ionian Mode (same as the major scale)



Dorian Mode

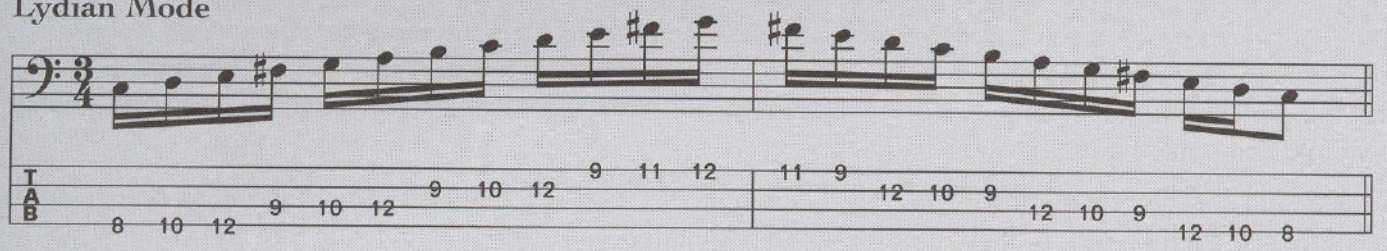


Phrygian Mode

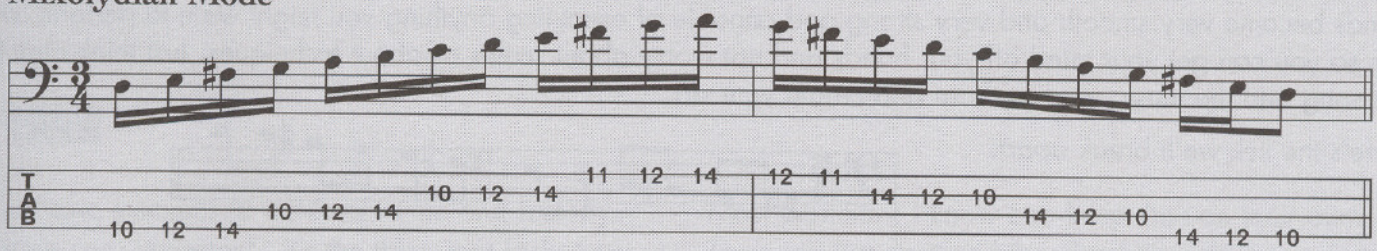


If you want more information on scales and modes, check out *Scales and Modes for Bass* (Alfred item 4434).

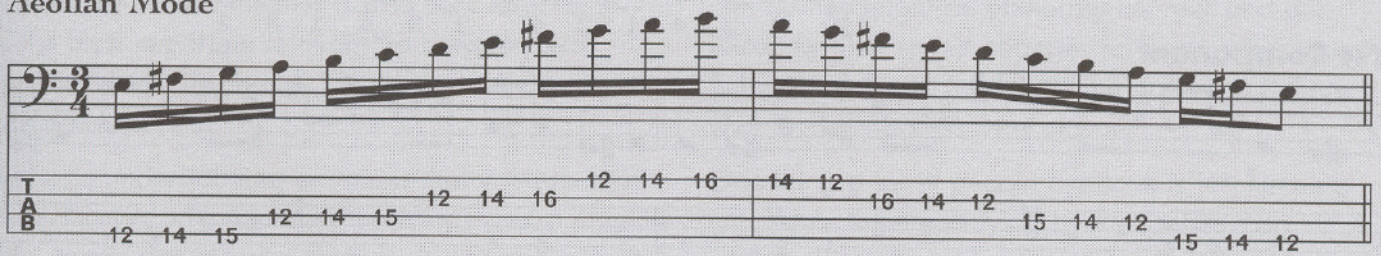
Lydian Mode



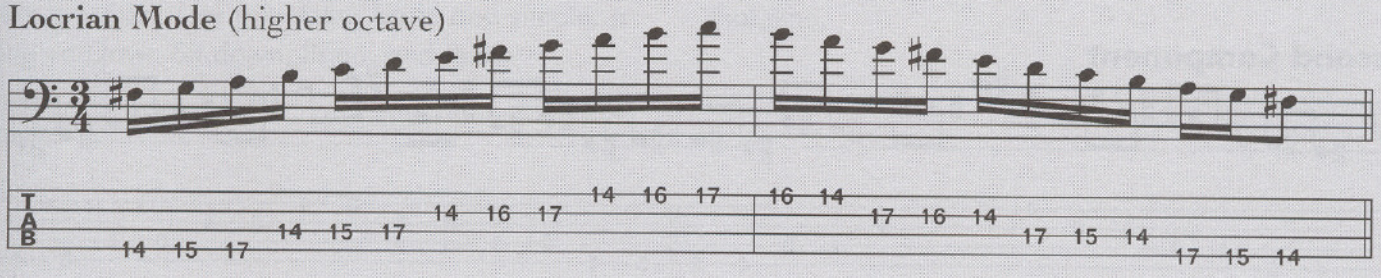
Mixolydian Mode



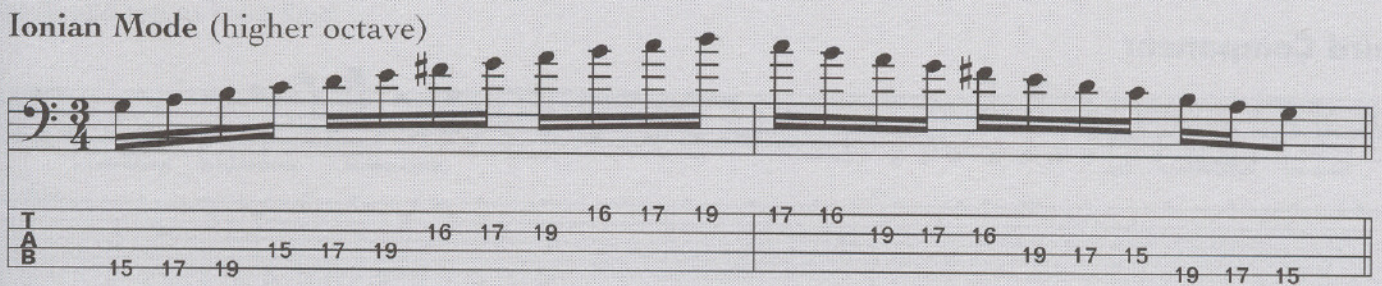
Aeolian Mode



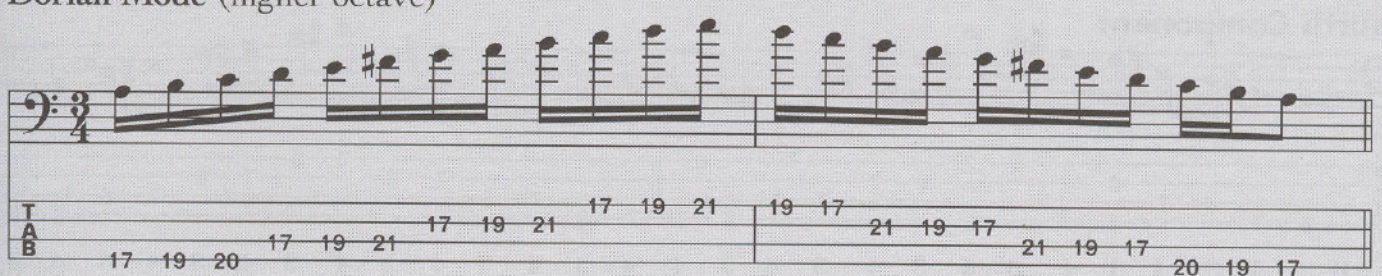
Locrian Mode (higher octave)



Ionian Mode (higher octave)



Dorian Mode (higher octave)

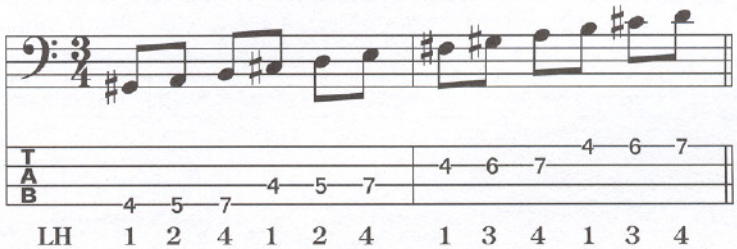


BREAKING DOWN A LICK INTO COMPONENT PARTS

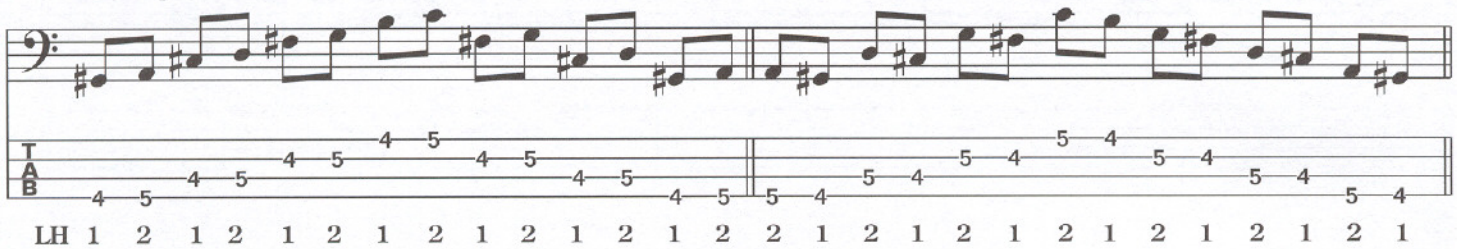
Now that I've shown you some patterns with half steps and whole steps, here are some exercises that are going to help your hands be able to play all those things. Basically, any time you see your fingers doing anything, you can break that move down into component parts. So if I'm playing a difficult lick, I just break it down into component parts.

This example can be broken down into four different moves, and you can exercise just those moves across the neck. Practice each one separately and use your imagination—try every combination you can possibly do, in time, preferably with a metronome or a drum machine. Use every combination of notes—across the strings, backwards, inside-out, upside-down, in every way you can conceive of creatively—and you'll find that your hands become very smooth and very strong and capable of executing anything you might want to perform. Do this so you can get your mind off your hands and not worry about scales or about techniques. Just think about the song and the music, and perform and create your art.

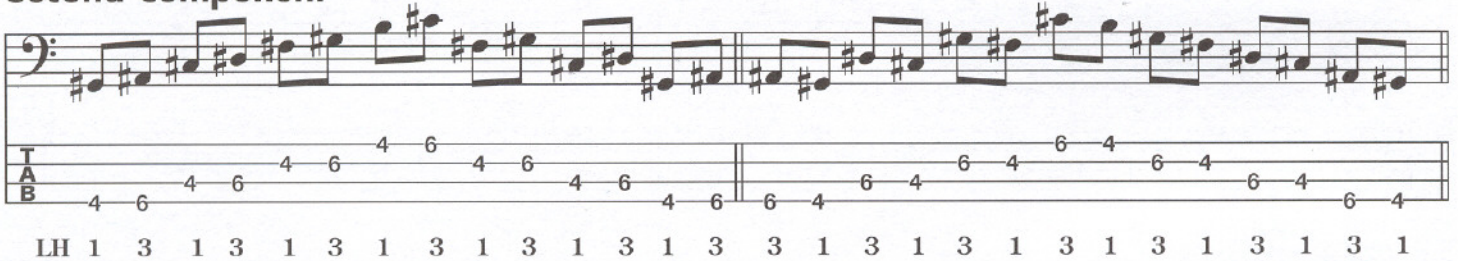
Here's the lick we'll break apart:



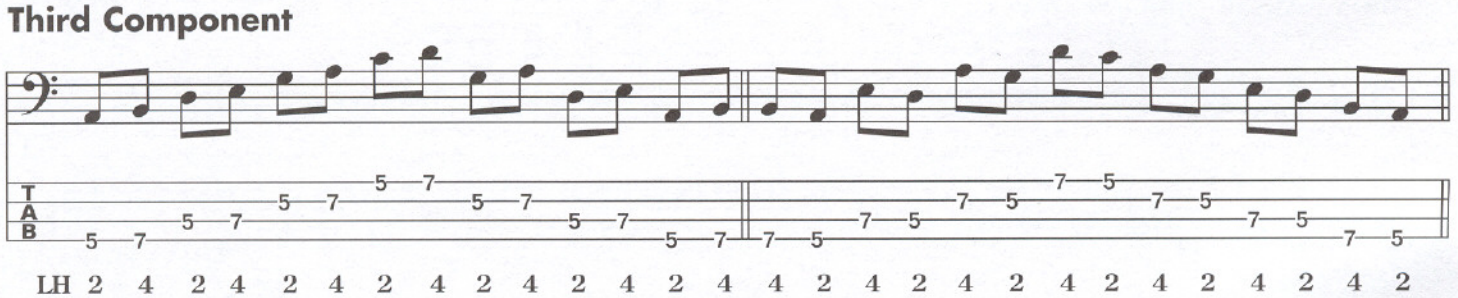
First Component



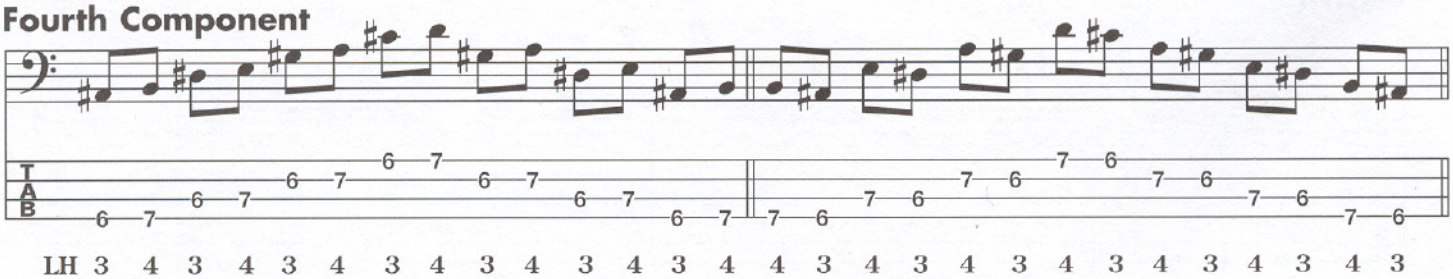
Second Component



Third Component



Fourth Component



Transposing

Often, situations come up when you need to play something in a different key. For example, sometimes singers will ask you to play a song in a higher or lower key to fit their voice better. Changing the key like this is called *transposing*, and it is very easy to do on a fretted instrument. You just have to move up one or two frets and all the patterns are the same, only in a different spot. The patterns I showed you in the key of G fit every key and apply to every key. Once you know those patterns with your left hand, you'll know a lot about a major scale, and you'll find that very helpful and useful in playing a song (which is the reason why we're doing this in the first place).

TIME

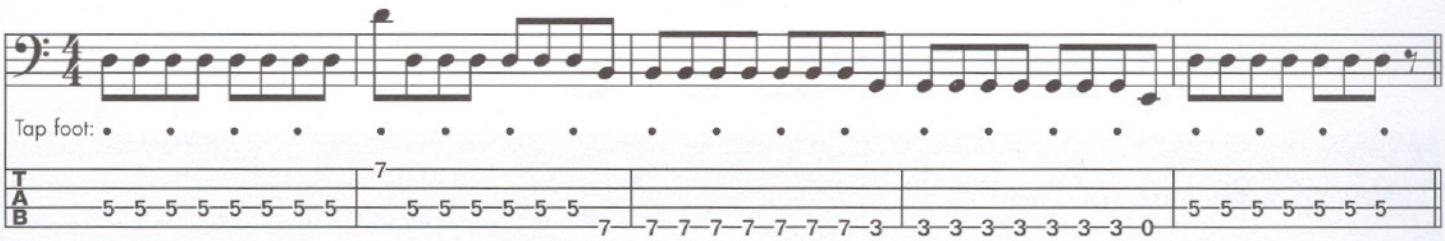
Two basic elements of music are time and melody. Time is very important. It's the thing that locks you together with everyone else. A bass player's relationship to the drummer is also very important—it's the most important relationship between two instruments within a band, because it lays down the rhythm section.

The basic understanding of time is that you are able to stay in sync with the other musicians you're playing with. I urge you to get a record, sit down, play with it, and listen to how the bass player and drummer work together. Use something basic and simple, a song you love. Sit down, listen, and learn.

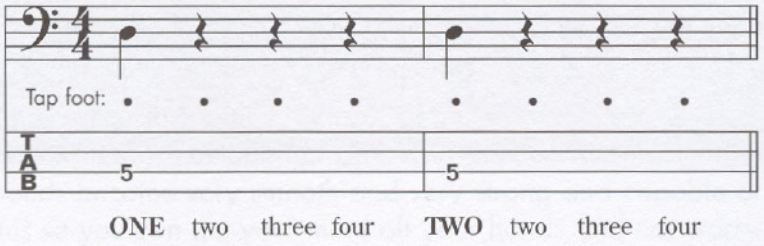
Most musicians I know can keep time on their own. They can just start and then keep that rhythm without speeding up or slowing down too much. Some can't—they might be obviously nervous and get faster, or their speed changes for some other reason. But your ability to hold that time and keep it there is vital to your success as a player.

One thing a lot of people overlook is just keeping time while they're playing by themselves. So, while you're on a stage or sitting down to practice, just keep your foot tapping, and keep that time.

Keep a steady beat as you play this exercise. The dots between the notation and the TAB (•) show where your foot should tap to keep time.



One exercise for you to do is start your foot going and play along with it in time. Just hit one note every four beats: **ONE**-two-three-four, **TWO**-two-three-four.

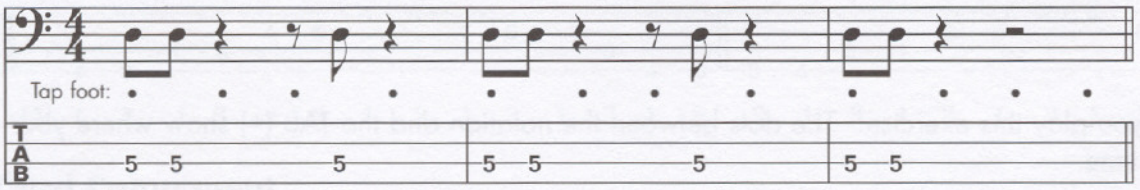


Keep doing that until you can do more.

There are a million different combinations you can do with just your foot keeping 4/4 time on the floor. The point is, make sure your body is moving, your foot is going, you're hanging on to that time, you're not letting it go, you're not speeding up or slowing down, and you have the independence to let your foot tap while you play along and work with it. Get in, out, upbeats, downbeats, threes, fours, all the combinations you can think of. Once you have a great lock with time like that, you and the drummer are going to lock together, and it's going to be a wonderful thing.

Use a metronome to make sure you aren't speeding up or slowing down. This will align the time that your body is keeping internally with the time your hands are keeping. And it's good to have one part of your body moving in time, like your foot going up and down, while you're playing in the band.

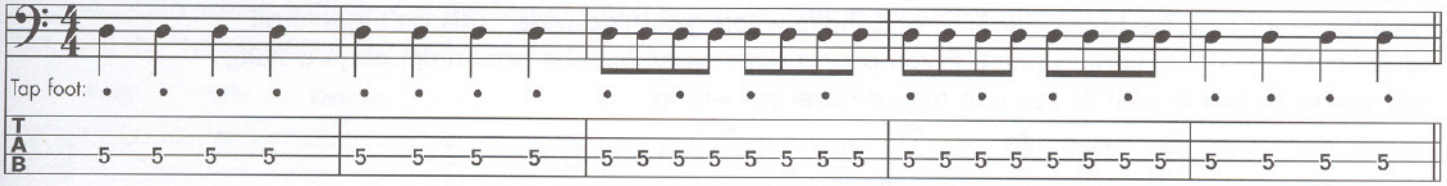
Keep your foot tapping once on each beat as you play the next few exercises.



Moving to the Music in Time

Most people, when they're in a band, are usually moving to some degree in time with the music. Though it may seem like they're just getting into it and moving along, a very important point is that they've got their body in a rhythm of motion, and it stays in that rhythm. So they may actually play out of that rhythm, but they always have that as a reference point to get back to. Sometimes I'll keep my foot going, and I'll speed up or slow down and make a mistake, but the foot keeps going. My foot is constantly moving so I always know what the actual time and sequence of the song is.

Again, use a metronome to work on exercises like the one below.
Play simple beats in time, then double it up.



Just work on that and stick with it for a couple of days. It will be great for your playing.

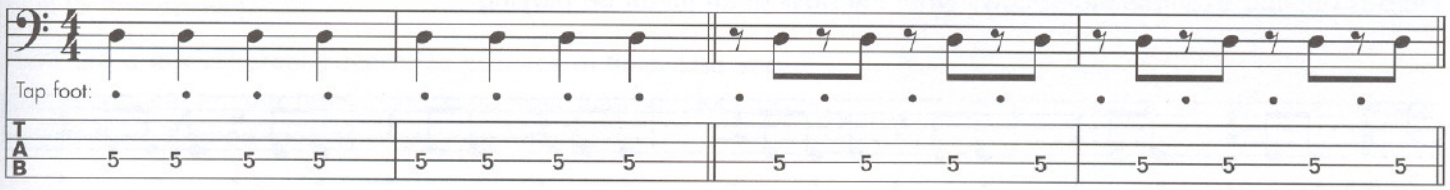
Ultimately, you're going to be playing with a drummer. These are the steps leading up to playing with a drummer. Drummers are also working to try to find a great way to keep in time. Once they find themselves in time and can keep time, keep a groove, then you two get together and you should be able to do it together. Ultimately, I recommend the bass player and the drummer get together and work out a groove. Work on a simple beat: play one note in time along with the drummer's bass drum, snare drum and hi-hat, so you can really sync together.

It's good practice to go between upbeats and downbeats. Downbeats are when it hits, and upbeats are when it reaches the top of the air before it goes back down again.

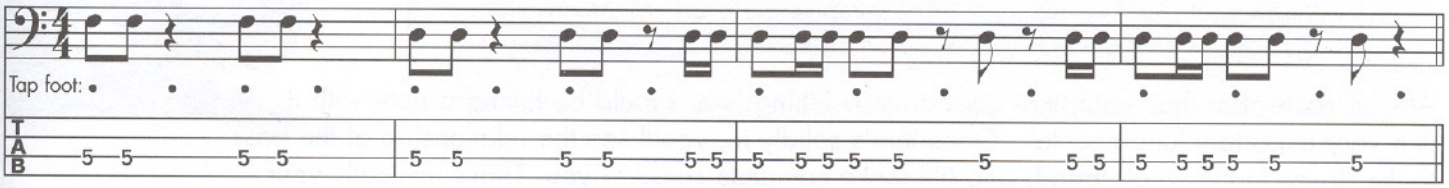
Here are some examples. Keep a steady beat.

Start with single notes on the downbeats:

Now work on the upbeats:

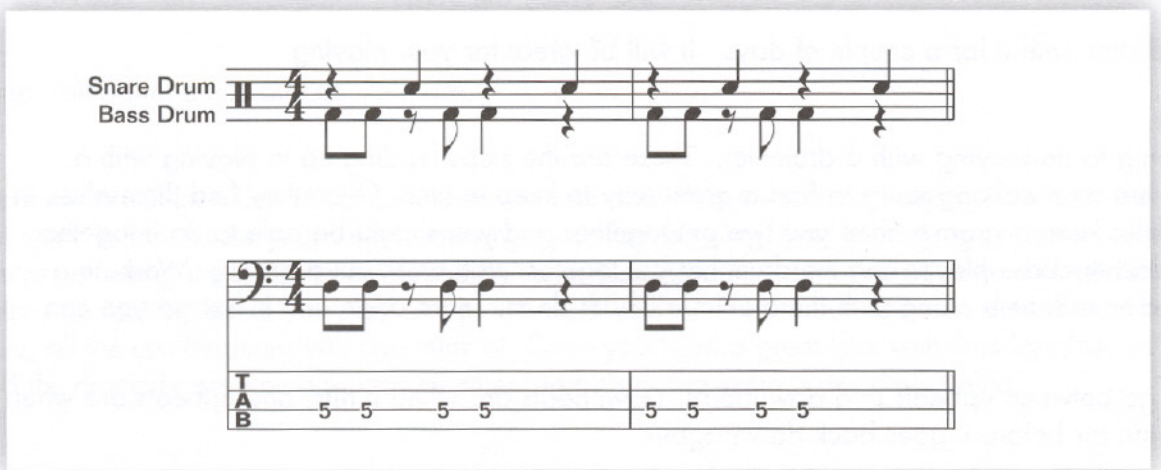


Now, mix it up:

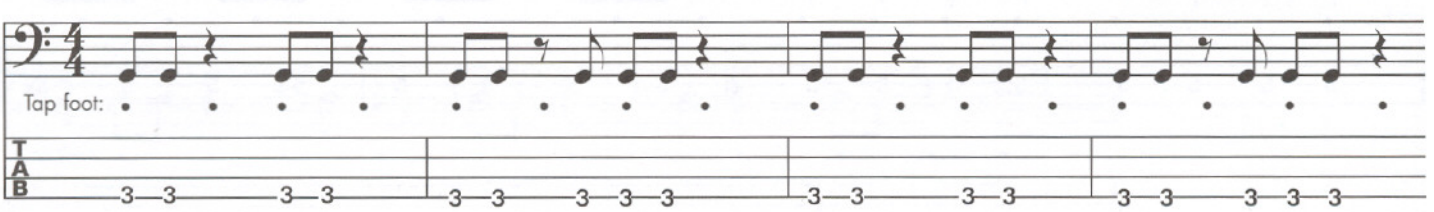


LOCKING WITH THE BASS DRUM

One very important point that I learned early on was about the relationship of the notes I played to the drummer's bass drum. As you watch and listen to a drummer play a pattern, listen for every time the bass drum hits, and that's where you hit a note. This isn't true in all cases, but it's a good starting point. If you play a note every time the bass drum plays a note, and you're locked in with it, you can almost never go wrong.



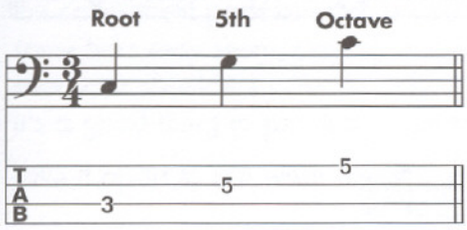
Here is another example that follows what the bass drum might be playing.

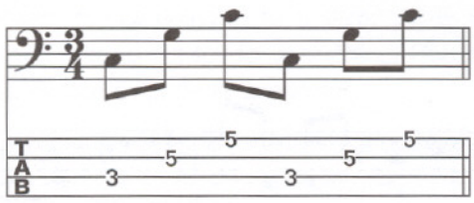


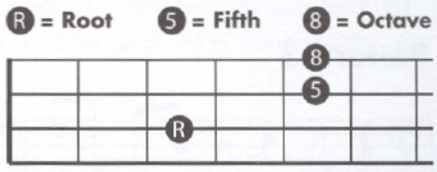
Always remember that when that bass drum is hitting, you should be hitting a note with it. This is a very important fundamental. Once that's solidly in, you'll see the relationship of the bass to the drums to the whole band, and it'll make complete sense to you. That's basically your entrance point into a song and into ensemble playing with a drummer, drums and band. So remember that point. It's one that helped me out a lot when I began.

ROOT–FIFTH–OCTAVE

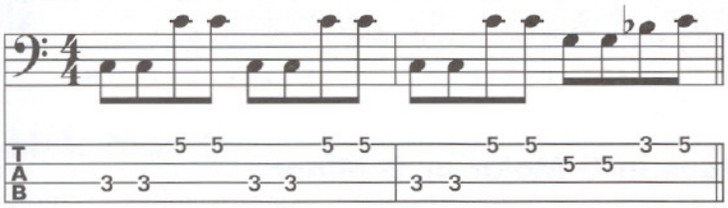
Here is something that's a real fundamental component of bass playing in so many songs and so much music. It'll help you to get up and running, get in a band, and start playing some music you love—which is the whole purpose of this whole endeavor in the first place. It is simply root–fifth–octave: the root note, a fifth above the root, and the octave above the root.



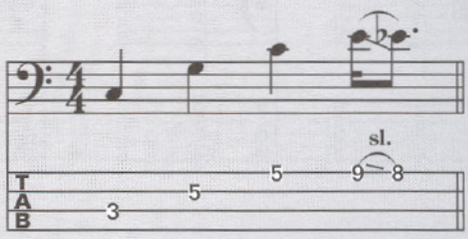




You hear octaves all the time:



You hear this in the first three notes of Strauss's "Thus Spake Zarathustra," used in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* from many years ago:



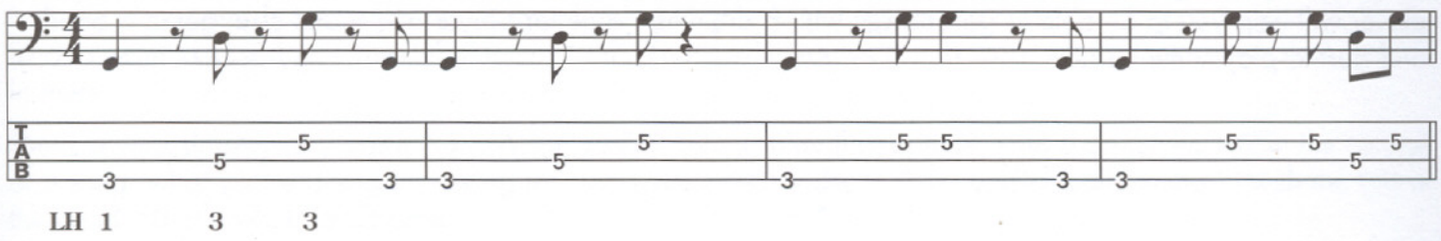
The root–fifth–octave is a basic bass component of so many millions of songs. It's something that you can learn really easily and apply to many songs right now.

In the key of G, the notes are low G (the root), D (the fifth), and high G (the octave).

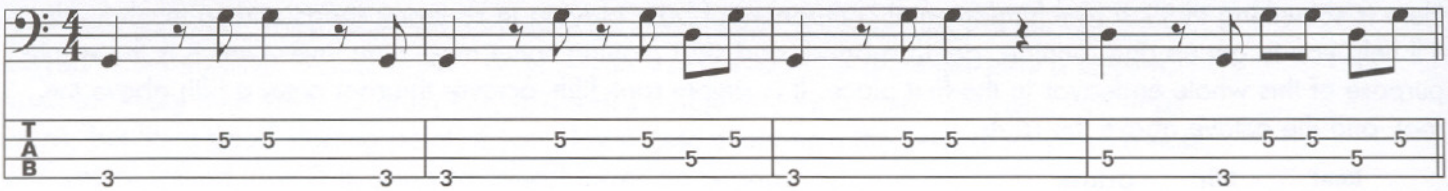
Here are a few different patterns to practice in time. Use very little movement in your hand, and keep your internal clock going so you have a good idea of what your time is.

I can just lay my finger across the strings when I play the next couple of examples, so I don't have to keep moving my fingers around every time I play a note. My hand closes down to hit the notes and then loosens up to deaden the strings so there's no noise between the notes.

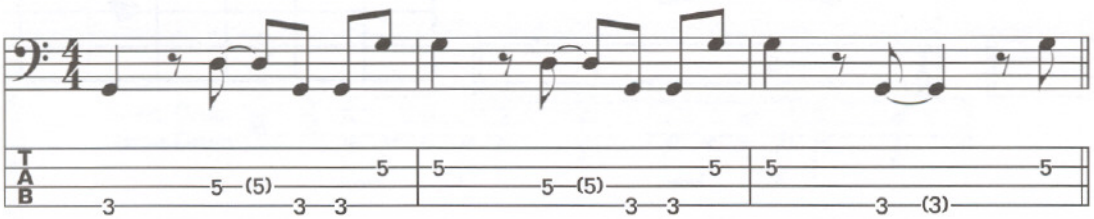
Pattern 1



Pattern 2

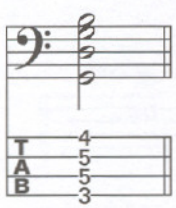


Pattern 3

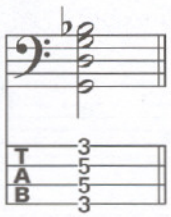


These notes fit in many different variations of the key of G, since G is your root note. Here's how fifths work in G major and G minor:

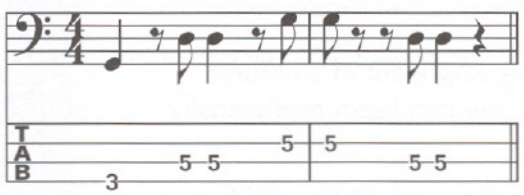
G Major Chord



G Minor Chord

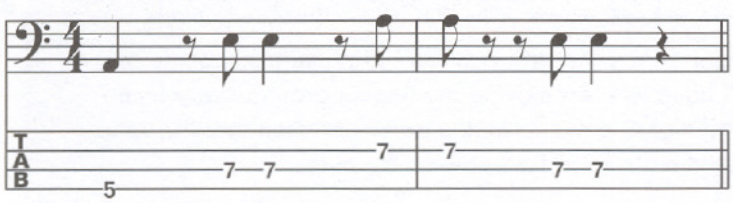


Root, Fifth, Octave in G Major or G Minor



If you're in the key of A, your root note is A, the fifth is E, and the octave is high A.

Root, Fifth, Octave in the Key of A



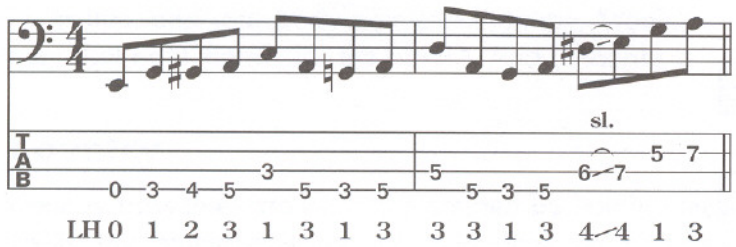
Play the pattern at different speeds and different tempos and different rhythms, and you'll start to recognize different songs. They're all root–fifth–octave with some plucking and some time to it. Knowing this as a bass player will help you to be able to go and get with a drummer, a guitar player or anyone else, get in a band, and start to play some music.

SIMPLE BASS LINES

Lick No. 1

Here is a basic bass line. It may seem ridiculously simple, but stick with it. Use a metronome and put together the component parts of what we've talked about already. Staying in time is really important. As simple as some licks may seem, staying in time when you're playing in a studio with a producer and everybody looking over your shoulders is really difficult. It is challenging to do something like this in time and do it consistently, so it's a good thing to practice, even if you're not exactly a beginner.

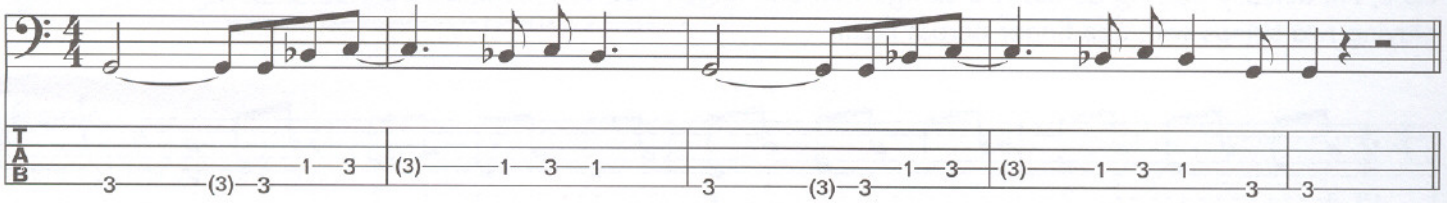
Take it apart to see what components to work on, like we did in the earlier section.



Lick No. 2

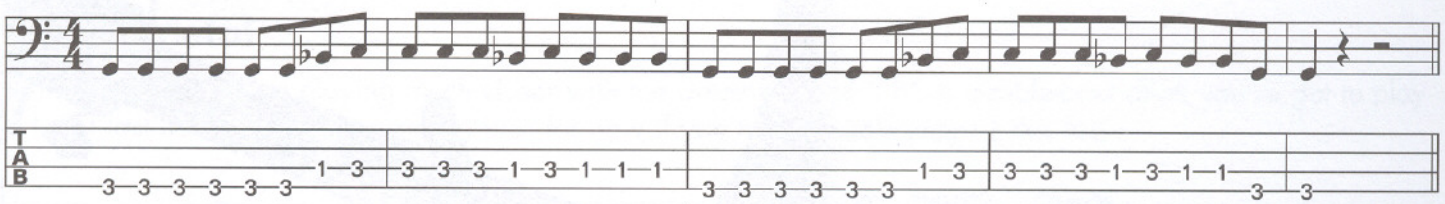
Here is another example. You can play it with your hand in one spot, so you don't have to keep moving around.

PART A



Here's part B to this lick. What we're going to do is just speed it up so it sounds a little bit smooth, and it's a little more "up."

PART B



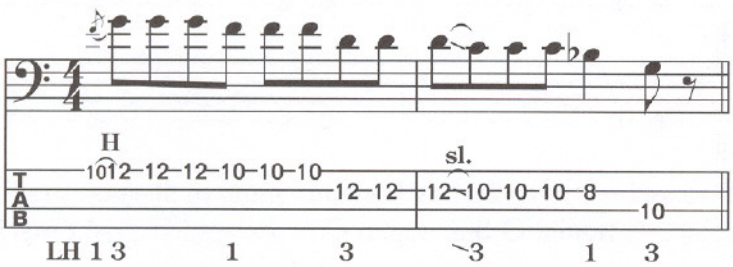
Put together, you'd start off with part A, and then at the end of the verse or chorus come in with part B, which is those same notes but doubled up on the plucking finger. As you get to the more exciting parts, you might tend to want to speed up—resist that temptation. That's why you've got to work with a metronome and stick in there.

That's a very simple, very basic lick. When you're able to play that in time, with a drummer, within the context of a song, what you're doing is playing the notes you need to do, in time, and actually fitting in with the rest of the band. That's what it's all about.

Lick No. 3

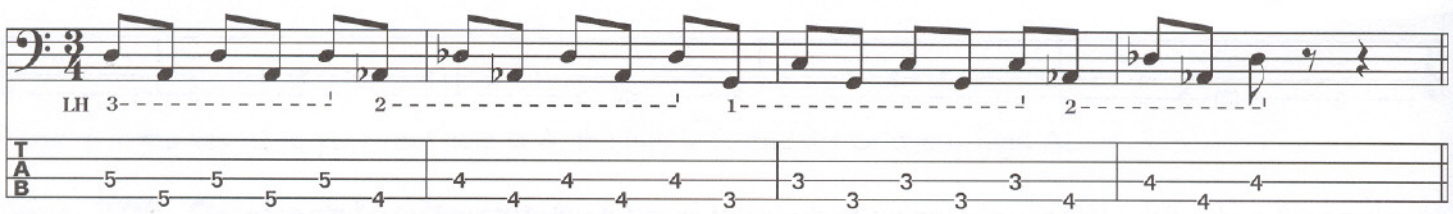
Here's another lick that is up higher on the neck. It's very important for you to know that there's more than just one area on the neck, and get used to playing in different areas. Try to bridge the high and low parts of the neck and play licks in different spots.

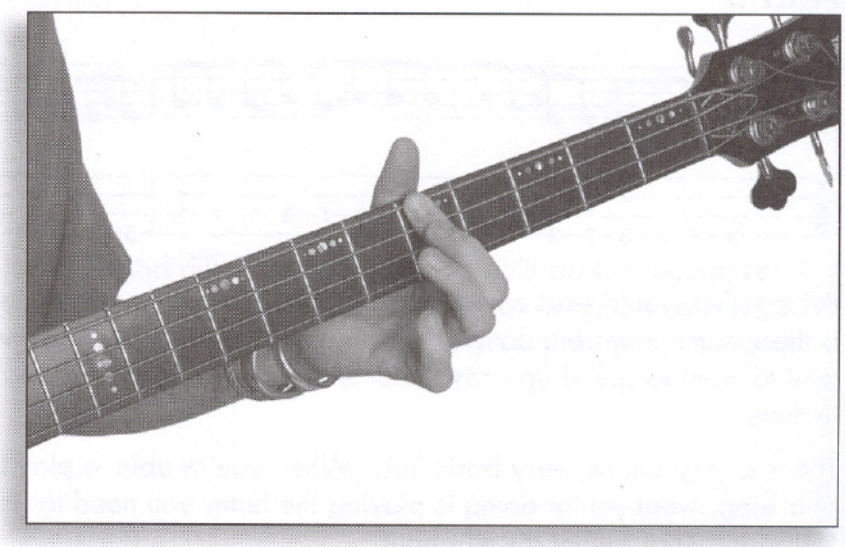
This is a pretty simple lick that's basically in G. Be sure to use a metronome. You could do it in one position all stretched out, but why put yourself in all that pain and anguish when you can just do it the easy way? When you move your hand, just keep it locked in shape and move the whole thing together.



Lick No. 4

Here, I'm actually barring across two strings with one finger. You can make a whole bunch of exercises for playing two strings with one finger across them.





Barring across strings.

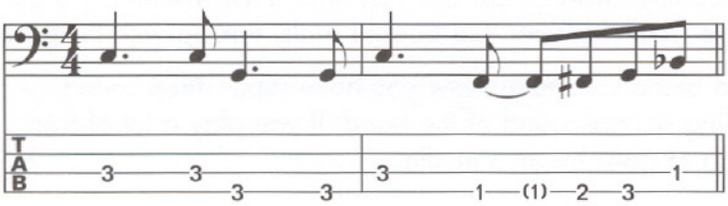
PLAYING IN DIFFERENT STYLES

It's a good idea to listen to the style of music that you love, and listen to what the bass player's doing to see how he's treating all these basic things. He's plucking with his right hand somehow, or slapping, and fingering with his left hand somehow, and it does fit in. I really have to recommend that you to listen to the music you love and listen specifically to the bass part. It's fundamental to be able to hear the bass in the song when you listen to it. I remember when I was a kid and heard the first couple of rock tunes that I was into, and somebody pointed out to me, "Yeah, hear that right there? It's the bass!" And I thought, "Wow, cool!" I never knew that before—a lot of people don't. So listen to what the bass player is doing in the type of music you love.

All these basic techniques I'm showing you fit with any style of music. No matter what type of music you're into—whether it's country, hard rock, heavy metal, even electronic or techno—there is bass in all of them (sometimes it's electronic, a six-string or something else). All these techniques work no matter what style of music it is.

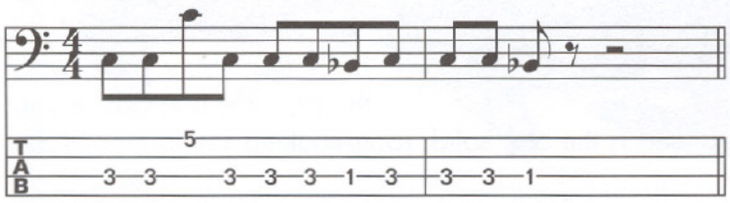
Country

Country bass lines are basically created by holding the root note, and maybe a fifth. You can move around easily, but remember that you're a fundamental part of what's lying underneath all the guitars and vocals, which are important in country music.



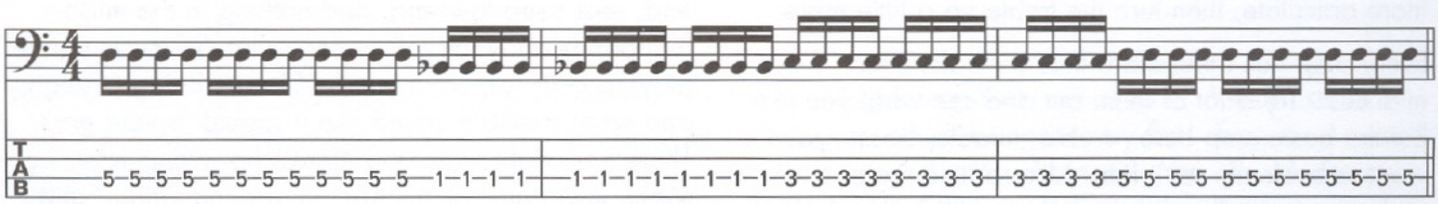
Rock

Here's a typical rock lick.



Heavy Metal

In heavy metal, you're playing much closer with the drummer, and if it's a double-bass drum you've got to play a lot of fast notes. Consider using a pick for now if you have trouble playing this fast.



It's best to really learn the basics—how to pluck, with which fingers, which ones work best and feel most comfortable, all your left-hand techniques, everything about what notes to play—and find out how it applies to you and the music you love.

USING AN AMP

The Ampeg BA-112 bass amplifier.

Here are some basics you need to know to get up and running with an amp. When you practice, you may choose to use a practice amp. It's not very elaborate, but it's all you really need to hear the notes you're playing and know if what you're doing is correct.

All amps have some tone controls on them—the basic ones are *volume* and *tone*. The tone control adjusts treble (high tones), middle (mid tones) and bass (low tones).

Turning up the **treble** will give you definition, the scrape of the strings, and all the click, but you don't get much low end or power behind it. You get articulation—you can hear all these notes go by, but you can't really feel them.

If you just pull up the **middle**, the mid-tones, it's kind of a happy medium—that's why they must call it middle. You can hear the note, but you can't get a really solid, deep, low-end foundation like you hear when a car goes by with a subwoofer. You get a nice cutting tone that might cut through the guitar player and drummer, but doesn't really link up with things.

When you just turn the **bass** up, you have the other end of the spectrum. Now you have super deep sound. It is a nice, beautiful, deep low end, filling out and rounding out the sound of the band, If you play a lot of fast notes, you can't really tell what the notes are—it just kind of goes by as a muffle.

The controls for the BA-112 are located on the top panel.

You balance these three elements of tone depending upon your taste, what you want to do as a player, and how you feel you should play. Your treble is the click, the rhythmic qualities of your strings; the midrange is the body of the note; and the low end is the big, solid, room-shaking sound that all us bass players love to make.

If you start *flat*, which means with all the controls set right in the middle, you have an equal amount of all of them. That's a great place to start. Fool around with that—if you want more low end, you can get it with more bass. If you want the sound to be a little more articulate, then turn the treble up a little more.

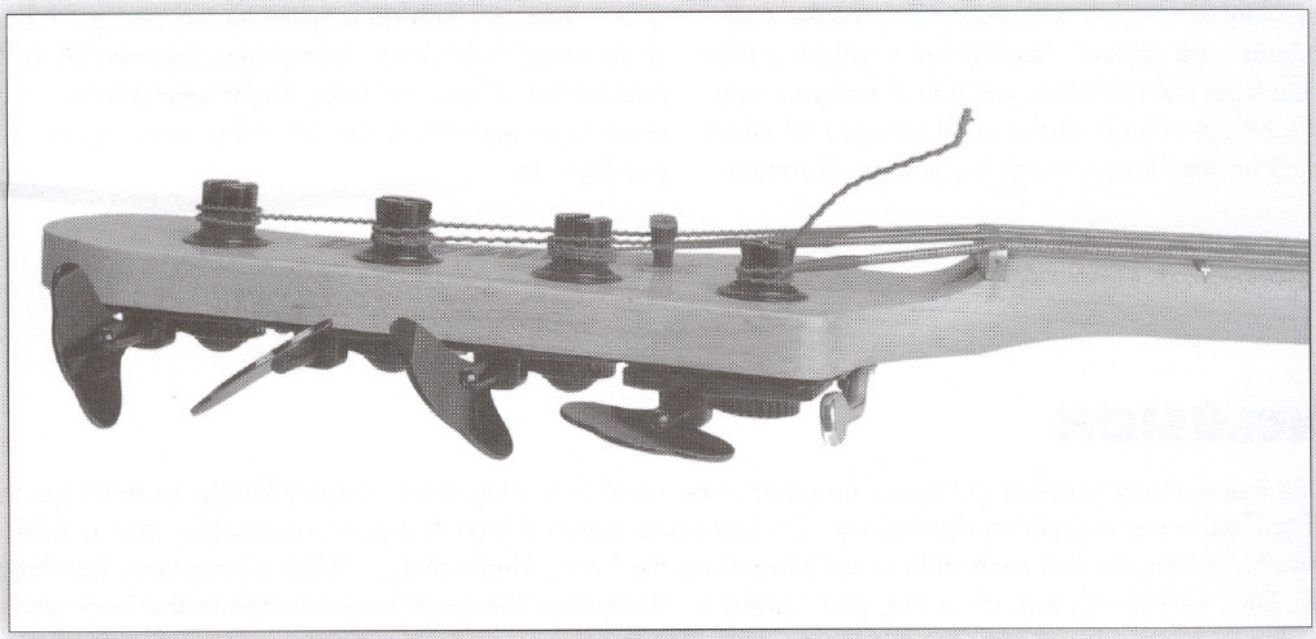
Every amp has other extra little controls, little nuances. Try a lot of them out and see what you like. But the basic amp here—treble, middle, bass—you want to basically set it flat. I like a little more midrange on it. For me as a player, I'll set the bass flat, I'll pump up the midrange a little bit, and I'll pull the treble down. This gives me a pretty even bass tone, a nice grind in the middle, and I'll hear a little bit of the click. That happens to be my personal preference and my style. Some guys do the opposite. They pull all the midrange out and turn the treble and bass all the way up, so you get a real bright high end, real deep low end, and nothing in the middle. It depends on what you prefer, what the music you're playing calls for, what you feel best playing through, and what makes it sound like it should to your ears. There's no right way, and there's no wrong way. Make your choices, experiment around with it, and see what you come up with.

CHANGING A STRING

Okay, so now that you have a bass and you're using it, there's going to come a point where you need to change a string. I use Rotosound strings—I've used them for many years. My own set is the BS 66 set.

First, get rid of the old string. Some people say you should take off every string and change them all at once, and some people say you should change them one at a time. I simply change one string at a time.

Take the string and give it a little kink at the tip so it's easy to get through the little hole in the tuner. Once you slip it through, you'll notice it's too long, and if you started winding it now, it would wind around so much there would be too much on there—a big ball of wound string. One option is to cut it, but what I usually do is bend it so I can jam it down into the little hole, and I'll start the first wrap by hand. Go around once, then hold it so there's tension on it. Hold it so it never loosens up, because if it's loose in the beginning and you tighten the rest around it, it's always going to have a loose part. Time after time, it's going to keep going out of tune. So keep the string under pressure and start to wind it, making sure it's not wrapped around the knob or anything else that could put a kink in the string and ruin it. When winding, make sure that each subsequent wind goes underneath and pushes the string down closer to the wood. That way you will get a good angle at the nut—if it's not very much of an angle, it can buzz, and if you have a really sharp angle, it will buzz less or not at all. A Stringwinder is great because it will speed up the threading.



The correct angle of the string to the nut.

After the string is on and in tune, once you pull it a little bit, it will go completely out of tune. What I do to keep the string in tune is pull really hard to tighten it up on the post, which brings it way flat. Tune it up again and pull it again a little bit. Do this a few more times until you can't pull it flat anymore. You should also try pulling it from the side too. Now, when you're on stage playing really hard, pounding away, the bass is going to stay in tune.

TUNING

Now we've got something very simple that a lot of people overlook—just how to get and keep your bass in tune. Basically, you want to get a decent tuner. I have a little digital tuner in my rack that I use when I play live and at home. When I hit a G note, for example, the G lights up and tells me if it's a little bit sharp or flat, so I'll adjust the pitch to get it right in the middle and be in tune. Tuning to records or CDs is unreliable because the players on the recording may have been out of tune in the first place.

Tuning is sometimes more of an art than a science. You'll notice that as you move the bass, the neck will adjust to either play flat or sharp depending upon which way you move. Some basses do it more than others. Mine does it a lot because I use a lot of bending, and it has a pretty flexible neck. So make sure that when you're tuning, you're in the position you'll be in when you're playing.

As you get your bass in tune according to the tuner, you may want to check it with your ears. Make sure the harmonics are correct. Sometimes it will be a little bit off, but from bass to bass, you'll find that you may be a little bit out of tune on the open strings and when you play it on the closed strings it's in tune. Harmonic tuning doesn't work as well on some basses as it does on others. It's a funny thing—that's why I say it's more of an art than a science. Each instrument has its own little nuances of what's right and what's wrong and how it works. Some basses are exactly in perfect tune up and down the neck all the time, and some basses are a little bit funny in certain areas. Then, when you put on a new set of strings, everything changes. It's just the nature of the beast—it's not going to be exactly in tune all the time. That's another reason why I said earlier that it is very important to stick with the same instrument for a while— because you learn its little nuances of how it tunes. So these are some of the things you may want to watch out for.

It is really important to always have a tuner. A lot of amps have a tuner output so you can run a cord from that into your tuner while you're playing. That way, if you're in a middle of a song and wonder, "Am I in tune or not?" you'll be able to check the tuner on the spot. You can then do a quick tuning and get it back up to speed right there. Sometimes you may be a little bit out of tune, and you might hear a little wavering—you can counteract it by using vibrato if you have to.

CONCLUSION

It took me many, many years to get up to the point of being able to play even remotely fluidly, so don't get frustrated if you don't get everything right away. Go back and review things that give you trouble. It may take some months before you are even able to get around on the bass. That's okay, it takes a long time, but that's all right. Stick with it—it's fun, it's a riot, you'll enjoy it. Remember the basic fundamentals in this book and DVD. Listen to music. Try to play the music you love. Try to listen to records and learn songs off records. I did that a lot when I was young, and it helped me a lot. And when you're ready for some new ideas about playing, pick up my advanced book and DVD, *Billy Sheehan's Advanced Bass* (Alfred item 21980).

At some point, find a great instructor or a good music school to help you expand on your playing, if you prefer—it's not always necessary. But either way, no matter what road you take stylistically or otherwise, I just want to wish you the very best with your bass playing. It's an amazing adventure. It's very rewarding, and I hope that you can achieve what you're setting out to achieve as a musician. I wish you the very best of luck, and hope I see you around.